

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Open University Tutors' Conceptions Of Teaching Excellence In Higher Education Teaching

### Thesis

#### How to cite:

Andersen, Kurt (2007). Open University Tutors' Conceptions Of Teaching Excellence In Higher Education Teaching. MRes thesis The Open University.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2007 Kurt Andersen



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.0000fa7a>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

**Master of Research Dissertation**

# **Open University tutors' conceptions of teaching excellence in higher education teaching**

by Kurt Andersen

Supervisors:

Martyn Hammersley

Anne Adams

**The Open University**

**Institute of Educational Technology**

**September 2007**

ProQuest Number: 13890022

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 13890022

Published by ProQuest LLC (2019). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	i
Tables.....	iv
Abstract.....	1
Chapter 1 Aims and objectives .....	2
Introduction.....	2
Background.....	3
Rationale .....	4
Research questions.....	5
Chapter 2 Literature review .....	9
Introduction.....	9
HE research within a broader education research context.....	9
The ‘psychologisation’ of HE pedagogy/research.....	11
Teaching excellence.....	16
Research into conceptions of teaching excellence.....	20
Teaching excellence themes.....	21
NTFS views.....	22
CETLs .....	23
Critique of the critical perspective .....	24
A ‘teaching excellence’ discourse .....	25
Conceptions of effective teaching .....	26
Conclusion .....	28
Chapter 3 Research design and methods.....	29
Research methodology.....	29
Method.....	31
Introduction.....	31

Design .....	32
Participants.....	33
Focus group participants .....	34
Semi-structured interview participants.....	34
Equipment .....	34
Procedure .....	35
Validity and Reliability.....	36
Ethical issues.....	42
Chapter 4 Collecting and analysing the data.....	44
Access.....	44
Sampling.....	44
Pilot interview.....	45
Analysing the data .....	45
Emerging themes.....	45
Question-driven themes .....	46
‘Literature-driven’ themes .....	47
Quantitative analysis.....	48
Chapter 5 Interpreting the data.....	50
Differences between focus group data and interview data.....	50
Thematic findings .....	51
Question-driven themes .....	51
A Concrete experiences of HE teaching quality .....	51
B Beliefs and values about teaching quality - and teaching approach ....	53
C Policy views and experiences relating to promotion of HE teaching quality.....	54
D Conceptions of HE teaching quality.....	56
‘Literature-driven’ themes .....	57

E Psychologised understanding of HE teaching.....	57
F Performativity discourse .....	59
G Concerns about ‘prescriptive discourses of rational practice’ .....	60
Emerging themes.....	60
Quantitative analysis .....	61
Chapter 6 Findings.....	63
Introduction.....	63
Overview.....	63
Findings related to previous research .....	65
Methodological issues .....	69
Focus group vs. semi-structured interviews.....	69
Technical issues .....	70
Extra-ordinary teachers .....	71
Conclusion .....	71
References.....	73
Appendices.....	76
Appendix 1 Protocol for interviews and focus group.....	76
Appendix 2 Consent and information form for participants .....	77
Appendix 3 Basic data sheet for participants .....	78
Appendix 4 Transcript extract from interview (Anne).....	79
Appendix 5 Transcript extract from focus group discussion .....	80

## Tables

Table 1 Focus group participants.....	34
Table 2 Semi-structured interview participants.....	34
Table 3 Emerging themes table .....	46
Table 4 Question-driven themes table .....	47
Table 5 'Literature-driven themes' .....	48
Table 6 Table for quantitative analysis of the use of 'good', 'effective' and 'excellent' .....	49
Table 7 Quantitative analysis of the use of 'good', 'effective' and 'excellent' .....	61

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine Open University tutors' conceptions of teaching excellence. A qualitative approach was adopted involving eleven tutors in interviews plus a focus group discussion on the topic. The recorded data were subjected to a thematic content analysis focussing on the tutors' conceptions of teaching quality rooted in their own practices. The study furthermore examined the data for indications that would confirm or disconfirm three strong claims made in recent higher education research literature relating to HE teaching practice: first regarding a 'psychologised' (understood mainly as a 'behaviourist') discourse among HE teachers (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001, Skelton, 2005), secondly a 'performativity' culture (focussing on targets as a consequence of current accountability regimes being introduced) (Ball, 2003, Carnell, 2007, Skelton, 2005) and finally a 'prescriptive' discourse (Nicol and Harrison, 2003). The study found that the tutors are highly dedicated to their students, strongly focussed on their students' learning and progress, but too modest to think of their own practice in terms of 'excellence', even if some of them have received teaching excellence awards and all are involved in projects in the Open University's Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. The findings suggest that the tutors are in favour of initiatives to promote teaching excellence and of HE teacher accreditation. Their teaching approaches are found to be co-constructivist (certainly not behaviourist) and student-oriented, and indications of being under 'performativity' or 'prescriptive' pressures are not apparent.



## ***Chapter 1 Aims and objectives***

### **Introduction**

During recent years the interest in ‘teaching excellence’ has increased among policy makers both nationally and internationally. This has led to increased funding of initiatives to promote improvements in teaching and has sparked an interest in the topic from both teaching institutions and HE teachers themselves. Since 1999 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has funded initiatives focusing on the enhancement of teaching quality. Teaching excellence awards are now commonplace, whereas just a decade ago HE teachers apparently were assumed to simply ‘do their work’. The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS), funded by HEFCE, was introduced in England and Wales in 2000 with the aim to raise the status and to professionalise teaching in HE. It has (and is) annually handing out awards, initially to twenty HE teachers, a number which has now been increased to fifty (see e.g. Higher Education Academy, 2007). HEFCE is also behind the establishment of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) in 2005 (HEFCE, 2007) of which the Open University was awarded four and is collaborating in another (Open University, 2007).

The increased interest in ‘teaching excellence’ has clear links to a broader trend in policymaking towards interventionism and accountability regimes (also labelled ‘new public management’ or ‘managerialism’), with the aim to assure, from ‘above’, the quality of service (see e.g. Clarke and Newman, 1997, Pollitt, 1993). HEFCE states as its aim to “ensure that all higher education students benefit from a high-quality learning experience fully meeting their needs and the needs of society”

(Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2007). HEFCE is furthermore funding the Higher Education Academy (Higher Education Academy, 2007), which in addition to administering the NTFS also accredits HE teachers based on criteria established by the Academy.

## **Background**

This increased interest in promoting ‘teaching excellence’ has also led to research into the phenomenon of teaching excellence, into the impact of the initiatives to promote teaching excellence and into the ways in which teachers and students perceive the issue.

Previous research will be examined in more detail in the literature review below, but a broad outline will be offered here to provide the context for the present study. The outline will make use of a framework presented by Alan Skelton (2005), who has examined recent research into ‘teaching excellence’ in HE, where he distinguishes between three main approaches:

*Operational research*, which looks at initiatives to promote teaching excellence. This type of research is usually ‘in-house’ research carried out to evaluate the initiatives.

*Inductive research*, which seeks the ‘essence’ of teaching excellence in order to promote it from above. The research is typically carried out by ‘expert’ educational researchers and typically involves the study of ‘role models’ for others to follow, i.e. describing good or excellent practice.

*Insider research*, which studies the experiences of excellent teachers, typically carried out by the teachers themselves. The focus is typically on the implementation of practical solutions to teaching problems using an action research approach.

A few studies can briefly be mentioned as examples of the varieties:

Skelton's own work (2004, , 2005) (discussed in the literature review), which critically evaluates the initiatives, e.g. the NTFS and CETL programmes, and the perceptions of teachers and students, would belong to the category of operational research.

Gibbs' (2001) research report presenting a series of case studies to illustrate good practice, commissioned by HEFCE belongs to the category of 'inductive' research. Ellington et al. (2000, , 1998, , 1986, , 1993) are also illustrative examples of this approach having worked on suggestions and recommendations for FE and HE teachers, e.g. "Seven golden rules for university and college lecturers" (Ellington, 2000) with the purpose of providing guidelines for them to become 'an excellent tertiary-level teacher'.

The 'insider' approach is represented by the huge amount of usually small-scale research carried out by teachers themselves, which is mostly published internally only. Recent initiatives to promote this kind of research within the Open University are the activities within the Centre for Outcomes-Based Education (COBE) and the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL).

## **Rationale**

A substantial amount of research has been carried out that relates to teaching excellence or teaching quality in a variety of ways, but very little of the research has focussed on the teachers' experiences, views and conceptions. This is a view also shared by Skelton (2005) who found that research involving HE teachers was either undertaken by the winners of teaching awards or were interviewing the winners. There are a few studies that have explored 'ordinary' teachers' (and students') views, and Skelton (ibid.) has furthermore examined their views on the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. What has not been done to date is a study of their views on the

Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which had just been established when Skelton's book was published, and no studies have been carried out in the particular Open University settings.

The key aims of the present study were to examine, on the one hand, the views and conceptions of Open University tutors on teaching excellence, and, on the other hand, to connect with recent research and claims made about HE teaching with relevance for teaching excellence, and examine the teachers' views on recent years' initiatives such as NTFS and CETLs, two years into the CETLs and seven years into NTFS.

There are several good reasons to carry out such a study. First of all, the amount of research carried out into 'ordinary' teachers' conceptions of teaching excellence is small (as will be shown in the literature review). Secondly, no studies appear to have been carried out into the experiences and views of teachers involved in the CETLs. Thirdly, it would be important to try to find out what kind of impact the recent initiatives are having on the teachers, who clearly are the 'targets' of the initiatives. Are they making teaching excellence their 'own' concept? Indeed are they aiming for teaching excellence in their work? And what does excellence mean to them? Listening to the tutors' voices may help to deepen our understanding of higher education teaching quality and inform both practices and policies.

## **Research questions**

The following are main questions that the study tries to answer, some of them by asking the participants directly about these:

- What are the teachers' own experiences of HE teaching quality?
- What are the teachers' beliefs and values about HE teaching quality?
- How do they describe their own approach to teaching?

- How do they view the policy initiatives to promote teaching excellence?
- What are their conceptions of HE teaching quality?

Furthermore, the study is concerned with examining a series of fairly strong claims made regarding the current state of HE teaching by certain key authors.

Claims have been made regarding the ‘psychologisation’ of HE education teaching (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001, Skelton, 2005) by which is implied that HE teachers apply ‘behaviourist’ or ‘scientistic’ understandings to their teaching. The study tries to find indications of such understandings.

Claims have also been made about a presumed dominant ‘performativity’ discourse within HE teaching (Carnell, 2007, Ball, 2003, Skelton, 2005), whereby is understood a focus on targets, indicators and evaluations (a likely, or perhaps obvious, consequence of the previously mentioned trend towards accountability regimes being introduced in many public services including health services and education). This study will look for indicators of such a performativity ‘culture’ or discourse: do the teachers focus on performance indicators such as students’ pass rates, marks and retention in their teaching work?

Finally, based on their discourse analysis of HE course documentation identifying a ‘powerful normative discourse’, Nicoll and Harrison (2003) have speculated as to whether teachers might feel “lost within prescriptive discourses of rational practice” (p. 34). The study will look for indicators of the studied teachers either opposing, embracing, or indeed, feeling ‘lost’ within such a discourse and of the existence of such a normative discourse.

To return to Skelton’s three approaches to research into teaching excellence, the present study does not fit neatly into any of his categories. The primary aim of the

study is to gain a deeper understanding of what Open University tutors involved with teaching excellence initiatives consider excellent, effective or good teaching and what it means to them in their daily work.

First of all, it would partly be ‘operational’, in the sense that it seeks the lecturers’ views on recent initiatives to promote teaching excellence through teaching awards and Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Thus the study may contribute to an assessment of the initiatives.

Secondly, it would partly be ‘inductive’ in the sense that the teachers are asked to describe their teaching practice in terms of teaching quality. There is, however, no agenda of extracting excellent teaching practice for others to follow. The aim is rather to seek an understanding of how the teachers relate to concepts such as ‘teaching excellence’, ‘effective teaching’ and ‘good teaching’, and how they relate these terms to their own practice.

Finally, the study is partly ‘insider’ research in the sense that it studies the experiences of teachers, and is carried out by someone who is an Open University tutor and indeed has been involved with a CETL project himself. Yet, it would not focus on practical solutions to teaching problems, and it would not use an action research approach. But it does seek to gain an understanding of the how the teachers talk about good/effective/excellent teaching as a ‘community of practice’ (to use Lave & Wenger’s (1991) term) and how meanings are negotiated. This is one important reason for including a focus group discussion in the study. It will be assumed that any understanding of ‘teaching excellence’ is situated within a community or indeed several communities (e.g. tutors, university, higher education). The study uses semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group discussion for data collection. This ‘dual’ design has a dual purpose: Individual interviews have

the advantage of making it possible to probe in-depth an individual teacher's experiences and views. Focus group discussions have the advantage, at least in this case, of accessing a 'community of practice', where views are negotiated through argumentation. Statements and claims will rarely be left uncommented on by peers. Secondly, methodologically, it was found worthwhile to compare the two data collection methods in order to determine which might be rendering most useful data for the analysis.

## ***Chapter 2 Literature review***

### **Introduction**

This review will provide an overview and analysis of selected literature on HE teaching with particular focus on teaching quality, whether this is labelled ‘teaching excellence’, ‘effective teaching’ or ‘good teaching’. The review will attempt to provide an overview (or ‘long shot’ to use a cinematographic term) of the current state of research into teaching and learning in HE in the UK by presenting in relative detail some of the main writings on the topic over the last decade. This ‘long shot’ will be followed by a ‘close-up’ examining in detail studies that are close to the topic of research of the present study, i.e. conceptions of teaching quality among HE teachers, in order to locate the study within an immediate context, which at the same time can support the rationale for the study.

### **HE research within a broader education research context**

Research into teaching and learning in HE needs, first of all, to be located within educational research in general. What is the current state of HE research? Yorke (2000) considers the issue in a paper that primarily appears to be a defence against what he labels the ‘collateral damage’ inflicted upon HE research following the attacks on educational research initiated by Hargreaves (1997). Yorke finds that there is a need for more pedagogical research in HE and mourns the fact that pedagogical research has been undervalued and most lecturers choose “to undertake research in their academic discipline rather than in the pedagogy related to that discipline” (Yorke, 2000, p. 106). Yorke believes the main benefit of such pedagogic



research would be to provide the teacher practitioners with needed insights into the teaching and learning process, thus he appears to consider it a tool for professional development as a teacher. On the topic of 'excellence' he finds that "many teachers deemed 'excellent' may have only a sketchy knowledge of the literature of pedagogical research, which is a matter of concern in that they may provide models of teaching activity which are ignorant of, or run counter to, the evidence from research" (p. 113). Nevertheless he argues for more research to support teaching and learning in HE and that practitioners need to engage with pedagogical research.

Stierer and Antoniou (2004) express similar views in a paper which focuses primarily on its title topic: "Are there distinctive methodologies for pedagogic research in higher education?" They agree with Yorke on the need for more HE pedagogical research. Their main concern, however, is with the lack of methodological confidence among HE researchers when it comes to pedagogic research, while at the same time finding that "there are few published texts that provide specific discussion or guidance on methodologies for pedagogic research in HE" (p. 276) despite the fact that recently such research has been encouraged. They speculate about the reasons, one being that pedagogic research in HE may not be significantly different from research in other educational settings, in which case HE teachers can draw on that. But methodologies for pedagogic research in HE may be distinctive even if the methods are the same. This can be due to the particularities of the HE context and the HE teachers' roles and experiences, and e.g. to the fact that in HE students are voluntary and adult. They find, furthermore, that there is little consensus amongst practitioners over what 'pedagogic research' entails and that even a basic distinction between methods and methodologies is rarely acknowledged. They speculate that this may be due to the traditional dominance of

quantitative approaches in educational research and “the consequent taken-for-grantedness of concepts such as ‘objectivity’ and ‘validity’” (with reference to Hammersley, 1993).

Another important issue considered in Stierer and Antoniou’s article is the question whether ‘hybrid methodologies’ could and should be developed, which would combine educational research traditions and traditions from the distinct academic disciplines and diverse disciplinary backgrounds of the practitioner-researchers, a question which Stierer and Antoniou leave open. A key point in their examination of HE pedagogic research in the UK is that it is diverse and not a single stable enterprise. Most HE pedagogic research is carried out by people that are not from an education background, which, as they say, can be “criticized as ‘amateurish’ and ‘parochial’, or applauded as relevant to the needs and local circumstances of the practitioners, and reflecting emerging syntheses of educational research and the research traditions from practitioners’ own subjects and disciplines” (Stierer and Antoniou, 2004, p. 283). It will also be interesting to explore in some detail the special situation of the Open University, where most face-to-face teaching is delivered by tutors, such as the participants of the present study, whereas most research is carried out by mainly non-teaching researchers. This picture has nevertheless become more blurred with recent initiatives encouraging tutors to carry out educational research.

### **The ‘psychologisation’ of HE pedagogy/research**

Malcolm and Zukas (2001) examine current literature of HE pedagogy from an ‘outsider’ perspective as specialists in adult education (labelling themselves “visitors from a related but distinct community of practice, and as legitimate peripheral participants” (p. 34) with reference to Lave and Wenger’s work on

communities of practice (1991). Malcolm and Zukas identify some general themes in their examination of current HE research of which the foremost is the dominance of “explicitly psychological versions of the learner and teacher” (p. 35), which they contrast to the large amount of sociological understandings in adult education writing. They link this psychological orientation with the growing interest in teaching and learning in HE emerging at a time when “the language of objectives, outcomes, competences and empowerment of the learner has ‘seduced’ both policy makers and practitioners in many areas of education” (p. 35). They link the government’s enthusiasm for evidence-based practice in social, health and educational policies with a psychological discourse which “constructs the educational process in such a way that it is apparently possible to predict and control what will be learnt and how” (p. 35). Malcolm and Zukas narrow the psychological discourse down to ‘psychology’s scientific paradigm’ characterised by a search for general laws governing human behaviour and the “objective, scientific studies on the techniques of teaching and processes of learning aiming to build a ‘technology of behaviour’” with reference to the prominent behaviourist psychologist Skinner (1973) and refer to the “relentlessly positivist orientation of much of the field” (p. 35). Malcolm and Zukas express awareness that psychology as a discipline has ‘moved on’ and yet with reference to Usher and Edwards (1994, p. 33) they find that “little (or no) cognisance is taken of the new social, feminist, constructionist and post-structuralist psychologies” (p. 35) or of the view that mainstream psychology constructs subjects in ways which better enable their regulation and control. Malcolm and Zukas find the ‘scientist’ approach illustrated by a surge of interest in applying Vygotsky’s work to teaching and learning in HE, where Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development is employed as a ‘teaching aid’, where psychological

theory generally is reduced to a technology of behaviour. They refer to this as 'cafeteria' psychology which "supports Entwistle's view that within HE, teaching is considered to be undemanding 'craft work' and is subject to a discourse of procedures, rather than explanations" (p. 36). HE teachers are reduced to "technicians who apply rules formulated by others" (p. 37).

Malcolm and Zukas (2001) contrast the 'student-centred' approach which they see as having been explicit in adult education writing, with teaching and learning in higher education (TLHE) literature, where "the 'learner' appears frequently as an anonymous, decontextualised, degendered being whose principal distinguishing characteristics are 'personality', 'learning style' or 'approach to learning' (p. 39). They seek to understand this by comparing it to the way in which psychology constructs 'subjects', i.e. as objects removed from history and culture, that are treated "as if they were rational, autonomous, unified, consistent beings" (p. 39). They seek (and find) a link between the current discourse in TLHE and a loose identification of who designs and delivers educational development in HE, whom they identify as a diverse set of departments and 'individual enthusiasts' within HE institutions, and point to the HE as "the only educational sector in the UK where it is possible to be 'trained' in teaching by someone who themselves has relatively little (or even no) HE teaching experience" (p. 39-40). This state of affairs is then contrasted to other areas of teacher education in the UK, which are considered "rich in conceptual and theoretical, as well as methodological debate" and is assuming that "a critical understanding of the social, policy and institutional context, as well as a critical approach to the content and process of the classroom transaction, is essential to the professional educator" (p. 40), something they argue is too often absent in current TLHE literature in the UK.

Malcolm and Zukas use quite 'strong' language in their description of the current orientation of TLHE research, and yet they state their aim as being "to promote a conversation across the gaps between the various communities of pedagogic practice" (p.40). In their claims of a dominant 'psychologisation' in TLHE it could be suspected that they are oversimplifying matters by referring to 'behaviourism' and 'scientism' as the foundation for the current orientation in TLHE. Malcolm and Zukas do not provide more than anecdotal evidence to back up this simplified view of the field. Again, this is a topic that is explored in the present study, i.e. whether the interviewed HE teachers will lend any support to the presence of such a 'psychologised' view of HE pedagogy among HE teachers.

In another article Zukas and Malcolm (2002) compare the fields of adult education and higher education and characterise them as being in 'separate spheres' (p. 203) and claim that the field of higher education pedagogy is 'undertheorised' (p. 204). The differences in theoretical underpinnings between adult education pedagogy and higher education pedagogy are repeated, where in adult education pedagogy, particularly humanistic forms of psychology, have been popular, whereas 'psychometrics, learning styles and other non-social understandings of the individual' (p. 207) have been less popular. In higher education pedagogy, on the other hand, Zukas and Malcolm find a focus on the educator as a diagnostician of learners' needs, e.g. learning styles or skills and they are seen as facilitators of learning using appropriate techniques and tools. The 'diagnostic approach' (p. 207) is in their view "favoured by many of the 'founding fathers' of British higher education pedagogic research" (with reference to Brown, 1993; Gibbs, 1992; Greenham et al., 1999; Boyatizis and Kolb, 1991). Zukas and Malcolm also express scepticism towards the ways in which Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective

practitioner in higher education teaching and learning has become an ‘all-embracing term’ with diminishing significance and usually presented as “taken-for-granted ‘good practice’” (p. 208), whose conceptual dominance they find clear evidence for in its unquestioned incorporation into the ILT accreditation framework (ILT, 1999).

Zukas and Malcolm distinguish between five different educator identities:

- The educator as critical practitioner
- The educator as psycho-diagnostician and facilitator of learning
- The educator as reflective practitioner
- The educator as situated learner within a community of practice
- The educator as assurer of organisational quality and efficiency; deliverer of service to agreed or imposed standards

Zukas and Malcolm examine in some detail the first two of these identities, which they consider dominant in adult education and HE, respectively: the ‘educator as critical practitioner’ (dominant in adult education) is compared to the ‘educator as psycho-diagnostician’ (dominant in HE), and the ‘psycho-diagnostician model’ is found lacking in a variety of ways, e.g. because it focuses on the product rather than the process, on the individual rather than the community, on the disciplinary community rather than the pedagogic community and that, overall, it has a psychological orientation rather than a social orientation (p. 211). They also claim that theory in HE pedagogy is converted into a set of rules for professional behaviour and that the role of HE pedagogic research is viewed as one of creating and refining theories in order to develop “rules for practice – in some ways rather like trying out recipes to see if they work” (p. 214).

Zukas and Malcolm believe the 'naïve version of theory' (p. 214) is a consequence of the separation of disciplinary and pedagogic communities in HE, and between research-based and pedagogic communities of practice. They also view with scepticism LTSN (which has now become the Higher Education Academy) and its aims of setting up a generic learning and teaching support network. In their view such an endeavour would overlook the social aspects of pedagogy (p. 215). Zukas and Malcolm acknowledge that the two pedagogic identities are caricatures and also that for them "[p]edagogy is more than teaching and learning" (p215) and should involve "a critical understanding of the social policy and institutional context as well as a critical approach to the context and process of the educational/training transaction" (215).

A main reason for examining Malcolm and Zukas in detail is that they are arguably the first to identify, and label, the so-called 'psychologisation' of TLHE, which would be an interesting topic to look for in the HE teachers' accounts of teaching excellence. Furthermore, the framework presented is an interesting one, which may find application in the analysis of the data gathered for this study. It will certainly be interesting to look for indications of whether Zukas and Malcolm may be right about HE teachers identifying themselves (directly or indirectly) as 'psycho-diagnosticians'.

## **Teaching excellence**

Alan Skelton (2004, , 2005) has examined in detail recent research into teaching excellence in HE and initiatives to promote it. In his book "Understanding teaching excellence in higher education : towards a critical approach" (Skelton, 2005) he explores the meaning of teaching excellence and finds that there has been surprisingly little in-depth discussion about what it means. In Skelton's words

“[e]ducational writing and policy documents often appear to assume that we all know what excellent teaching is, and terms like ‘excellent’, ‘good’ and ‘competent’ are often used interchangeably” (p. 10).

Skelton examines the current state of HE teaching excellence as one in which performative interpretations are ‘in the ascendant, favoured by politicians, educational policy makers and institutional managers’ (p. 36). Psychologised understandings of teaching excellence, on the other hand, dominate the literature on HE according to Skelton (based on Malcolm and Zukas as discussed above) and therefore they have had a considerable influence on practice. He finds it likely that practitioners’ understanding of teaching excellence is informed by “cognitive, humanistic and to a lesser extent behavioural psychology” (p. 36). It is worth noting that although Skelton bases his concept of a ‘psychologised’ understanding on Malcolm and Zukas, his definition of it differs from theirs, which stresses behaviourism (see above).

Thus, Skelton paints a picture where performative understandings dominate policies and psychologised understandings dominate practice. He also points out, however, that the two share “a belief in identifying universal approaches to teaching that can meet the needs of individuals” (p. 36). He sees the two forming a ‘powerful alliance’ where the psychologised perspective works “to ensure that the teacher-student encounter is productive leading to individual growth and development” (ibid.) and the performative discourse values the universal approaches, because they “enable teaching and learning to be predicted and controlled, thereby aiding system efficiency” (ibid.).

Traditional understandings, e.g. lecturing and ‘didactic teaching’ are considered by Skelton to be out of favour, because they “pay insufficient attention to



the learning process”, and he expresses concern that critical perspectives on the other hand, are ‘marginalised’ being labelled by critics as ‘too self-interested and political’ (ibid.).

Skelton also looks in detail at the recent initiatives in the UK (and abroad) to promote teaching excellence, such as teaching awards (examining the National Teaching Fellowships Scheme and its impact in detail) and Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning. According to Skelton, studies carried out in the USA [(Tollefson and Tracey, 1983; Jacobsen, 1989)] found “no clear link between excellence awards and teaching quality, with no differences being found between award-winning and non-award-winning university staff” (p. 43). In his examination of research into teaching awards Skelton finds that some researchers have aimed to find the essence of teaching excellence within the teachers themselves by studying the teachers and promoting the findings to the sector (p. 45). In his examination of the NTFS (Skelton, 2004) he finds that there has been little consideration of what sort of teaching excellence the scheme promotes. He characterises it as individualized, underpinned by ‘reflective practice’ (a concept he considers has been included in the ILTHE framework without any justification), psychologised, practical and performative. As Skelton puts it “[t]hrough its assumptions, structures, procedures and criteria, and in the perspectives, practices and development projects undertaken by the award winners themselves, a performative and psychologised form of teaching excellence is in the making” (p. 59).

Skelton distinguishes between four ‘ideal types’ of understandings of teaching excellence in higher education: traditional, performative, psychologised and critical.

**The traditional ideal type** refers to the historical idea of a university and teaching excellence, which still is prevalent in the ‘top tier’ of universities. HE in this model is elitist (which in Skelton’s view clearly is undesirable) and teaching excellence requires suitable ‘raw material’ through selection of students (p. 25). Teaching excellence, in this model, is associated with mastery of a discipline.

**The performative ideal type** refers to the “contemporary understandings of teaching excellence which have been shaped by changing relations between higher education and the state” (p. 25) with an emphasis on measurement and control. This model draws upon human capital theory, where governments ‘invest’ in people expecting return on the investment in terms of national economic performance.

Related to the model is the conversion of work-based learning institutions into universities and, e.g., the ‘vocalization’ of the curriculum. Universities should ideally serve governments, industry and society. Marketisation is also a characteristic of this model in which HE becomes part of the knowledge economy and competes globally for students. The state plays a strong role regulating the universities in order to “maximise individual, institutional and system performance” (p. 30). Teachers are all “encouraged to become excellent against a series of performance measures through development and self-regulation” (ibid.).

**The psychologised ideal type** of teaching excellence is related to the calls for professionalisation of teaching in HE since the 1990s. Skelton refers to papers by Malcolm and Zukas (examined above), which show that psychologised understandings of teaching and learning dominate the pedagogical literature in the UK. Skelton describes the psychologised understandings of teaching excellence as focussing primarily on the transaction between the individual teacher and student making teaching excellence a relational matter. Thus, the excellence does not reside

in the teacher or the student, but rather in the interpersonal relationship between them. The excellent teacher seeks to understand the individual needs to the students, through personality, learning styles and the teacher will apply appropriate teaching methods and learning experiences from a 'toolbox'.

**The critical ideal type** is clearly Skelton's favoured type as he declares himself 'critical' and promotes a 'critical approach' throughout his book. It is one that commits itself to critical understandings of teaching excellence, which are associated with "the goals of freedom, justice and student empowerment" (p. 33). It is, furthermore, informed by "a range of critical theories (for example, critical theory itself, neo-Marxism, feminism, anti-racism, Freireism)" (p. 32). As Skelton says '[t]he role of the teacher is to act as a critical or transformative intellectual... who disturbs the student's current epistemological understandings and interpretations of reality by offering new insights and theories" (p. 33). Furthermore, 'teaching cannot simply be reduced to technical or practical matters; it inevitably involves moral questions about what it means to be educated" (p. 34). Skelton's critical perspective is critically evaluated below, but the overall framework of four understandings of teaching excellence may be useful for an examination of the HE teachers' accounts in the present study. Skelton acknowledges that his favoured critical perspective has had little impact on HE practice (but believes there is an increasing interest in it). Similarly he finds little evidence of a 'traditional' teaching excellence understanding.

## **Research into conceptions of teaching excellence**

The perhaps most interesting part of Skelton's book is his examination of studies into 'ordinary' teachers' and students' conceptions of teaching excellence and his own studies into this.

Two small-scale qualitative studies carried out by Vielba and Hillier (as reported by Skelton (2005)) have focussed on teacher and student perspectives on teaching excellence. Vielba and Hillier (2000) conducted a focus group study, which found differences between, on the one hand, student and teacher perspectives (emphasising personal qualities of the lecturer and involvement with the subject), and public models of teaching excellence (stressing planning, deployment of resources, assessment or evaluation) on the other (p. 94).

Hillier and Vielba (2001) subsequently, using repertory grid methodology (Kelly, 1955), found a mismatch between teacher/student understandings ('softer') and official discourses of teaching excellence promulgated by the QAA and the ILTHE in the UK. They suggest the 'softer' expressions are not reducible to readily quantifiable and measurable indicators of performance in the QAA movements.

Skelton (2005) conducted in May-June 2001 (during the second year of NTFS) four focus groups sessions with teachers and students from two HE institutions, two with teachers and two with students. The teachers and students were from a variety of subject disciplines and aged between 25-56 (teachers) and 20-52 (students). Skelton states as his aim to find out what 'ordinary' teachers and students understand by teaching excellence; to elicit their views about the NTFS as a prominent national-level award scheme, and to explore their preferred images of teaching excellence. Based on a content analysis a number of major themes were identified:

### *Teaching excellence themes*

- Teaching excellence needs to be distinguished from didactic teaching.

Teaching excellence requires an interactive process (involving dialogue and group work).

- Teaching excellence requires a collaborative relationship between teacher and student.
- Teaching excellence involves teachers making appropriate choices from a repertoire of techniques and methodologies to suit students and context of learning.
- Excellent teachers are committed to a long-term continuous process of professional development through critical reflection.
- Excellent teachers have a number of personal qualities and commitments, such as enthusiasm, energy, approachability, interest in students as people, communication skills and ability to relate to and empathise with students.
- Teaching excellence involves demonstrating concern for the ‘weaker’ students. It was not associated with achieving good grades or working successfully with the ‘best students’.

### *NTFS views*

Most participants in Skelton’s studies were positive in principle about schemes to promote teaching and learning in HE, but sceptical about NTFS. The scheme was considered tokenistic, elitist and divisive (recognizing ‘superteachers’), where some teachers even saw it as ‘career suicide’ to win a fellowship (it would take time from research and RAE submission). Concerns were raised about the development projects that the Fellows were to undertake: taking good teachers away from teaching, rewarding them for it by asking them to do research. It was also suggested that money would be better spent on those teachers most in need of support and development rather than those who are deemed ‘excellent’. Skelton concludes that teachers and students do not simply follow and reproduce official understandings of teaching excellence characterised by a belief in performativity, but

rather adopted a psychologised discourse emphasising personal qualities of the teacher, their human potential and relationships with the students. In Skelton's view official discourses ignore the human potential of the teacher or seek to minimise its impact through planning, management and measurement of performance, and he emphasises that there was little mention in the teacher and student perspectives of course objectives, effective delivery and learning outcomes. Instead they were "restoring the teacher to the heart of the teaching and learning process" (p. 99), i.e. similar 'soft' skills as identified by Vielba and Hillier (2000) and Hillier and Vielba (2001). Skelton concludes that the teachers and students were adopting a psychologised discourse of teaching excellence countering official discourses committed to performativity and that official discourses have not impacted on teachers and students, who appear to ignore the regulatory frameworks. Thus he finds a mismatch in the way teaching excellence is perceived.

### ***CETLs***

Skelton also examines HEFCE's initiative to fund Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), which was launched in January 2004. Although the CETLs had not yet started at the time of Skelton's book, he saw the wide variety in topics and aims of the centres as a 'post-modern' celebration of difference rather than a redistributive initiative, which would appear to run counter to the performative standardisation work otherwise characterising recent HEFCE initiatives. It will be interesting to hear the views of the HE teachers of the present study, which are all involved with Open University CETLs.

## *Critique of the critical perspective*

It is clear, from the above discussion that Skelton with his 'critical' perspective advocates a political agenda and combines it with a sceptical/critical approach, attributing to this approach a series of values and approaches such as 'freedom', 'student empowerment' and 'emancipation'. These values, it could be argued, are not the sole 'property' of such a critical discourse, but could be attributed to other perspectives, too, e.g. the psychologised perspective. Certainly, it could be argued that a 'psychologised' understanding, if it is understood more broadly than as mere behaviourism or scientism, would easily be able to include such aims and values. And could a psychologised perspective (even in a 'powerful alliance' with the performative perspective, as Skelton suggests) not become properly founded on current psychological research, which, as acknowledged by both Skelton and by Malcolm and Zukas, has a much stronger social focus than the scientism that they criticise higher education pedagogy for being based on? Could not such a perspective be more solid than one that is fundamentally 'critical' of any particular dominant perspective, but does not offer any clear strong alternative pedagogical foundation, but rather just a (diffuse) political one?

Interestingly, he contrasts the critical stance with "absolutism (an enduring truth or essence) and radical perspectivism (anything goes), since both negate the confrontation with one's inability to choose choice itself and the personal responsibility imbued with the exercise of self-will" (p. 11). Against this it could be argued that most people, given those three caricatured alternatives provided by Skelton, would be forced to become 'critical'.

Overall, Skelton's 'critical' perspective is not well defined, but seems to be one that would vary with the current dominant perspective. Thus, it would

presumably be critical of its own perspective if it was to become the dominant one, and yet it is not very clear which perspective that really is.

Nevertheless, Skelton's research into 'ordinary' conceptions of teaching excellence and his theoretical framework appear relevant for the present study.

## **A 'teaching excellence' discourse**

Nicoll and Harrison (2003) examined the work performed by course documentation produced by an (unnamed) UK university (a teacher training course) to establish what characterizes a professional teacher in higher education. Using a discourse analysis approach they aim "to develop critical awareness towards the discursive work of any formula for the development of professional competence" and thereby "broaden the debate about effective teaching and learning to include and legitimate alternative discourses of the 'good teacher'" (p. 25). Nicoll and Harrison found that learning in the course documentation was constituted as a "cognitive activity of the individual that can and is to be regulated and controlled by the teacher through the application of pragmatically relevant ideas drawn from cognitive research". Thus a 'cognitivist', not a 'behaviourist', interpretation. As Zukas and Malcolm (discussed above) they find teaching "defined by a set of generally accepted rules for pedagogic practice" (ibid.). Nicoll and Harrison are indeed linking their work with Zukas and Malcolm's suggested five pedagogic identities (Zukas, 2000) (described above), though they do not identify any one identity as dominant in the course discourse, but rather stress the omission of the 'educator as situated learner' as well as the 'educator as critical practitioner' from the discourse. What they find is a powerful normative discourse of standards of 'best practice' through a series of outcomes, principles and values, which they suspect "may leave academics lost within prescriptive discourses of rational practice" (p. 33-34) and argue for "a



range of understandings of the good teacher, which provide alternative and more proactive and critical capacities” (p.34). Thus their study is critical of the way teaching excellence was portrayed in the course documentation. It will be interesting to see whether the HE teachers in the present study will express sentiments and views in agreement with this analysis.

## **Conceptions of effective teaching**

Carnell (2007) examines university teachers’ conceptions of effective teaching through interviews with eight teachers. She applies an appreciative inquiry approach and finds a series of themes and develops a grounded theory based on the interview data.

Carnell asks the HE teachers to discuss the following four themes:

- Effective teaching
- Characteristics of effective teaching and learning
- What supports teaching in being effective
- What inhibits teachers being effective

A perhaps striking main finding from the study is that when the teachers are asked to present examples of effective teaching, they all focus on students’ learning rather than on their own teaching activities. Thus they appear to link effective teaching to student learning. Carnell sees in the responses “an explicit shift from a constructivist to co-constructivist approach” (p. 30) in comparison with previous research. The themes include ‘facilitating a community of learners’, ‘learning through dialogue’ and ‘sharing responsibility for teaching and learning’. Carnell

finds three dominant characteristics of effective teaching: “learning is transparent”, ‘dialogue enables learning’ and ‘a community of learners generates knowledge’ (p. 30). In terms of what supports and inhibits effective teaching, Carnell finds the teachers talking about working together, dialogue and joint research as helpful for sustaining effective teaching and learning, whereas the hindrances appear to concern a main tension relating to a ‘performativity’ culture – a topic also found by Skelton (2005) (though Skelton’s studies are not discussed by Carnell). The performativity topic has also been discussed extensively by Ball (2003), who describes performativity in highly critical terms as “a new mode of state regulation which makes it possible to govern in an ‘advanced liberal’ way” (p. 215). With reference to Lyotard (1984) Ball describes how knowledge is commodified and knowledge and knowledge relations are ‘de-socialized’. Carnell finds two inhibiting themes: how such a performativity culture can affect teaching creating tensions between pressures to perform in terms of research activities, which are better rewarded than teaching performance (a different view on performativity to Skelton’s, which focuses on the pressures to perform within teaching (Skelton, 2005)). The other theme Carnell identifies in her study is the differences in how teachers react to the performativity culture, where some cling on to ‘old’ ways of relating (‘ethics of professional judgement and cooperation’) while others embrace the ‘new’ ways of relating (‘competition and performance’).

Carnell’s view on ‘performativity’ is clearly similar to Skelton’s, though he is contrasting it mainly with a ‘psychologised’ understanding of teaching and his favoured ‘critical’ perspective for which he finds scarce support in his studies of teaching excellence (Skelton, 2005), whereas Carnell ‘joins forces’ with the teachers interpreting their accounts as ‘co-constructivist’ and ‘learning-centred’. These

differences are likely to be indications of the researchers' different personal preferences, where both may be useful frameworks to consider in a data analysis of teachers' conceptions of teaching excellence.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review has examined in detail a series of studies and papers, gradually moving from a 'long-shot' of the state of research into HE in general to a 'close-up' on studies that are very close in both topics, methods, scale and approach to the present study. The discussed authors all have important contributions to make, either in terms of conceptual or theoretical frameworks that may be applied to the present study, or they may help situate the study within a broader context, or, finally, the studies of teachers and students conceptions of teaching excellence/effectiveness may be used for a comparison and contrast to the findings of the present study.

## ***Chapter 3 Research design and methods***

### **Research methodology**

The methodological approach of the study can be characterised as broadly ethnographic with the subjective views of tutors being at the centre of the research questions. The term ‘broadly’ is used because some ethnographers might consider ethnography only research that is based on ‘fieldwork’, i.e. data collected through observation in natural settings. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) e.g. characterise ethnography as involving “the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time” (p. 1). This study ‘created’ the settings by arranging interviews and a focus group. However, it still makes use of an ‘insider’ perspective (indeed the researcher is in several ways a ‘peer’ of the people being investigated) and in its approach to analysing and interpreting the data the study is similar to typical ethnographic research. Further qualification may be helpful: some ethnographic research has strong affinities with phenomenology and makes a virtue of the fact that the research is strongly subjective, with the researcher necessarily strongly involved in the processes under investigation (see e.g. Okely, 1994). Others will take a more detached approach (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) and, while acknowledging that there is a subject-object problem (or perhaps rather a challenge) in that the researcher is part of the social world (in this case even part of the local ‘community of practice’ under investigation), would consider it possible to ‘step back’ and try to stay as impartial and ‘objective’ as possible. This is the position taken in this study.

The choice of methodological approach is not entirely determined by the researcher’s particular preferences or convictions, but rather an outcome of a careful

consideration of the chosen topic and the research questions. Lund (2005), has suggested that one starts out asking the following two fairly straightforward questions:

Is the research descriptive or causal? Is the research exploratory or hypothesis testing?

The answers to these questions can provide guidance as to which epistemological approach is underpinning the study. As the present study has been described, the answer to Lund's first question would be that it is clearly not causal, but rather descriptive of the teachers' accounts. The answer to the second question would also be quite clear: it is an exploration and there are no stated nor, hopefully, any assumed hypotheses regarding the topic. There are, however, a series of non-causal and non-hypothetical questions that the study will seek answers to.

Ethnography is a broad approach that can make use of a wide range of methods for data collection and for interpretation of the data. The data were collected in two ways: through audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. These methods were considered the best available for obtaining the teachers' accounts and qualified answers to the questions asked. It was originally planned to conduct observations of the participants, indeed, it was planned to carry out the interviews after observing the tutors during a tutorial in order to be able to contrast their teaching (inter)actions and their statements about teaching. This was unfortunately not possible within the scope of this study as it would have involved travelling to many different locations around the country at certain dates. It would also have been useful to conduct a survey of a much larger sample of tutors in order to increase reliability – such a survey could have asked similar questions to the interview questions, or it could have been carried out after the interviews/focus

group discussion in order to further test the findings. Again, this was not possible within the frame of the present study. The choice of data collection methods actually used was based on them being essential for an in-depth investigation of tutors' conceptions of teaching quality. In order to ensure depth of analysis, and maintain the scope of the investigation, the study involves a relatively small number of participants, four interviewees and seven focus group participants.

The analysis and interpretation of the data is described in subsequent chapters. Let it be said here that it consists mainly of a content analysis of the data for predetermined and 'emerging'<sup>1</sup> themes, combined with an attempt to identify discourses that have been discussed in the literature review. A limited quantitative analysis of the occurrence of certain key words is also attempted.

## **Method**

### ***Introduction***

There are several ways of analysing 'talk'. One option would be to consider language a transparent medium and assume that 'words mean what they say' and what people say is a true reflection of reality. Another approach would be to examine the medium itself and how it is used, and focus less on what is being said. This is what is usually done in a wide variety of ways within discourse analytic approaches (Wetherell et al., 2001a, Wetherell et al., 2001b). In discourse analysis the focus is not so much on *what* is said as on *how* it is said. This study will try to steer a middle ground between these, where it is acknowledged that the meaning of words is not

---

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it should be said here that I do not really believe in themes 'emerging' from the data (a commonly used expression). It seems contradictory, on the one hand, to acknowledge, or indeed embrace, researcher subjectivity, and on the other hand maintain that themes 'emerge' as if they were 'popping out' of the transcripts. Themes are identified by the researcher in a highly complex and to a large extent subjective process, and it is very likely that other researchers would have found other 'emerging' themes in the present data. This does not imply that the identified themes are not 'valid', only that they are not the (only) 'truth' in any absolute sense.

necessarily clear and unambiguous. Indeed one of the aims of the study is to try to clarify the meanings of certain key words such as ‘teaching excellence’, ‘effective teaching’ and ‘good teaching’. On the other hand, this study will not in great detail examine *how* HE teachers talk about teaching, though this would certainly be a worthwhile project on its own, and the data collected for this study might be a starting point for such an investigation. The principal aim of this study is, nevertheless, to investigate what tutors say *about* HE teaching quality, and in doing so seek answers to the research questions stated in Chapter 1. An important secondary aim of the study has been to compare data collection methods, where the main comparison would be between individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, aiming to maintain as much as possible the same topics and questions in both contexts.

### ***Design***

The study is a small-scale qualitative study using semi-structured interviews of four participants and a focus group discussion with seven participants. An interview protocol with topics and main questions was designed to be used both for the individual interviews and the focus group discussion (see Appendix 1). The collected data was interpreted and analysed mainly for its content applying the predetermined themes from the interview schedule. Furthermore the data was examined for indications that might throw light on the claims made by certain authors as discussed both in Chapter 1 and 2. The data was also examined for ‘emerging’ themes, i.e. for themes that might appear within the interviews and focus group discussion that were not planned for or deliberately sought after in the stated research questions.

The interview/focus group protocol had four main themes, which were

- Concrete experiences of HE teaching quality
- Beliefs and values about HE teaching quality and own teaching approach
- HE teaching quality policy views
- Conceptions of HE teaching quality

Within these themes a series of topic-setting questions (see Appendix 1) were prepared to facilitate the participants talking about the topics and the exact formulation of the questions was adapted to the context in each of the data collection events. It was decided before the interviews and the focus group discussion that the researcher could ‘go with the flow’ and ask further questions of a different character to the ones planned if the situation allowed or invited to do so.

### ***Participants***

The participants were a total of eleven experienced Open University tutors, who were all involved with the Open University’s Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). The total HE teaching experience of the eleven teachers was 211 years, an average of over 19 years. The sample was purposefully recruited among teachers involved with the CETLs as this was expected to provide an ‘insider perspective’ with practical experience of teaching excellence programmes. This choice of purposive sampling obviously implies that the study cannot claim to have investigated the views of the entire OU tutor population. Furthermore, incidentally, the sample is dominated by tutors of science and technology subjects. It is likely that this has led to a lesser than average familiarity with psychological and educational theories. Furthermore, several of the participants mentioned in the interviews that they had also received teaching awards, though systematic information was not gathered about this. These characteristics of the sample are all reminders that the study cannot claim to represent in a general sense OU tutors’ views and conceptions.



The main advantage of the sampling choice made, is, on the other hand, that the tutors were well informed about recent teaching excellence initiatives, not ‘biased’ by subject-related knowledge of psychology and education, and finally, some turned out to have valuable insider information also about teaching award schemes.

### Focus group participants

Name (all aliases)	Gender	Subject	OU teaching experience	Other HE teaching experience	Other teaching experience
John	M	Science/Biology	33 yrs	7 yrs	0 yrs
Gwen	F	Software engineering	9 yrs	9 yrs	4 yrs
Jo	F	Science/ Math/Technology	14 yrs	7 yrs	0 yrs
Kevin	M	Technology/Project management	9 yrs	0 yrs	4.5 yrs
Mel	M	Technology/Humanities/Social Science	7 yrs	0 yrs	7 yrs
Leslie	M	Engineering	26 yrs	17 yrs	2 yrs
Chris	F	Technology	34 yrs	0 yrs	3 yrs
Total	4M/3F		132 yrs	40 yrs	20.5 yrs

Table 1 Focus group participants

### Semi-structured interview participants

Name (all aliases)	Gender	Subject	OU teaching experience	Other HE teaching experience	Other teaching experience
Michelle	F	Environmental Science/Environmental Law	0 yrs	5 yrs	0 yrs
Anne	F	Math/Physical science	5 yrs	0 yrs	18 yrs
John	M	Environmental Technology/Engineering	14 yrs	0 yrs	0 yrs
Ann (telephone interview)	F	Technology	15 yrs	0 yrs	0 yrs
Total	1M/3F		34 yrs	5 yrs	18 yrs

Table 2 Semi-structured interview participants

### Equipment

Audio and video recording equipment was used for the focus group discussion and for all interviews except one telephone interview (only audio-recorded).

## *Procedure*

The participants were recruited through the internal communications channels of the Open University's CETL office. The invitation to participate explained about the general purpose of the study ('examining higher education teaching excellence'). Having volunteered to take part they were informed in more detail about the study and were given a combined consent form and information sheet (see Appendix 2), which they were asked to fill in and sign. Furthermore, they were asked to fill in a 'basic data sheet' asking them for name and contact details and teaching experience (Appendix 3). This form also asked them to choose an alias for themselves that would be used throughout the study, with the purpose of making it possible for them to identify themselves in the research documentation (e.g. for the purpose of respondent validation). The focus group participants were furthermore given name tags with their chosen names and these were used throughout the discussion by all participants. The use of aliases caused some initial amusement among the focus group participants. It did also occasionally cause brief hesitation, when participants were referring to each other, but overall it was not perceived as getting in the way of the tutors speaking their minds.

The interviews and the focus group discussion questions centred around the above mentioned four main themes (concrete experiences of HE teaching quality; beliefs and values about HE teaching and own approach to teaching; policy experiences and conceptions of HE teaching quality).

The interviewees and focus group participants were all asked a series of core questions, listed in Appendix 1, though the questions were not necessarily stated literally as in the protocol, and not necessarily in the order listed, but rather adapted to the context. Particularly in the focus group it was necessary to introduce

questions when there was an appropriate opportunity. It was ensured, however, that all core questions were answered. This means that the focus group was moderated more strictly than if the aim had been to simply get the participants to 'talk about' topics.

The interviews were scheduled to last for about 30 minutes (which they all did with a few minutes variation) and the focus group discussion for one hour (in practice it was 75 minutes). All events were audio-recorded and video-recorded except the telephone interview, which was only audio-recorded. The video-recordings were only made to support understanding and interpretation and as a backup. The recording equipment was placed overtly, but not intrusively, near the interviewees and in the focus group two audio-recorders were placed at each end of the large desk around which participants were seated, and the video recorder was in one corner of the room. All participants agreed to the recordings taking place before they were started.

All interviews and the focus group were carried out June-July 2007. All sessions took place on OU premises (offices/meeting rooms) with the exception of the telephone interview. The interview and focus group discussion data were transcribed verbatim and a thematic content analysis was carried out (described in Chapter 4).

### ***Validity and Reliability***

The study faces several challenges in terms of reliability and validity. Reliable knowledge is usually defined as evidence supported through repeated testing under the same conditions. Reliability is thus mostly connected to quantitative research where by applying a closed system approach it is ensured that few variables are at play, so that the same conditions can be reproduced again and

again. Valid knowledge, on the other hand, is often defined in terms authenticity, i.e. whether it is 'true to life'. In this way, reliability and validity can be seen to work against each other, where e.g. repeated laboratory experiments provide high reliability but may have a low ecological validity due to the imposed control over the data collection situation. Ethnographic fieldwork, on the other hand, would provide validity understood as 'authentic' knowledge, but low reliability as it would be difficult to replicate the conditions of the research. Both terms are, however, disputed. Empiricists usually refer to validity as a matter of whether the 'instrument', e.g. a questionnaire, measures what it was designed to measure (construct validity). They also refer to validity when discussing the certainty with which one factor causes another (explanatory validity). In qualitative research, on the other hand, the aim is usually for ecological validity, i.e. whether the results reflect what is the case in the 'real' world (Yates, 2004). From an empiricist perspective this would be a matter of 'external validity' which refers to whether it is possible to generalise to the external world based on e.g. laboratory experiments.

In terms of reliability, as defined above, the present study can only aim for a limited form of reliability in the sense that the study can openly present the data and the method of analysis and in this way make it possible for peers to 'judge' for themselves whether they would have drawn similar conclusions. Also, if the study is in agreement with other similar studies carried out, a degree of reliability could be seen to emerge in this way. Another related issue is whether the size of the sample allows for generalisations beyond the eleven participants. This would depend on the population that one intends to generalise. It is clear, however, that the present study cannot generalise far beyond the group under study. Again, if other similar studies have reached similar conclusion there may be some scope for tentative

generalisations. The main aim in this study has been to seek an in-depth understanding of 'what is the case' with the participants in the present study.

In terms of validity the study will clearly not be studying 'naturally occurring' data, but rather will generate the data in interviews and a focus group discussion. The main reason for this is that the topics are, in a way, 'meta' in the sense that it would not be easy to find out what the tutors think and feel *about* higher education teaching without asking them. This is an important argument against what Hammersley and Gomm (2005) label a 'radical critique of interviews', a view which stems from the discourse analytical camp, mainly from advocates of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. Hammersley and Gomm distinguish between four components of the critique:

- first of all, "the rejection of the idea that what people say somehow represents, or simply derives from, what goes on inside their heads";
- secondly, the scepticism about whether accounts represent reality at all (as an independent entity);
- thirdly, what they label 'severe methodological caution', which, basically, questions the reliability of 'common' people's accounts as compared to the supposedly more reliable observations by trained researchers;
- and, finally, the issue of reactivity in the interview context, where the interview data is seen as 'contaminated' by the artificial interview situation (p. 9-10).

As Hammersley and Gomm (2005) point out, the four arguments are partly contradictory, particularly as the two first arguments question whether anything can be known (epistemological issues), whereas the two latter indicate that what can be known is a matter of degree (methodological issues). Hammersley and Gomm's

main point is that all four arguments have cogency, but if they are taken to an extreme, they become excessive or absurd. They suggest that “the proper conclusion to be drawn from the radical critique... is that researchers must exercise greater caution in their use of interview material, *not* that they should abandon all, or even the more orthodox, uses of it.” (p. 13). The main consideration leading to the choice of using interview and focus group discussion data in the present study has, nevertheless, been that the data that was sought could not easily have been gathered from naturally occurring situations.

A further critical point could be raised against the use of focus group discussions (to which the ‘radical critique’ above also applies), and the researcher was initially sceptical of the use of focus group discussions due to the risk of people being influenced strongly by their peers, where they might be too concerned with profiling themselves and constructing and maintaining an identity to ‘speak their minds’. This is an issue that will be explored further below, but for now it can be said that such concerns actually also would apply to the interview situation. A clear advantage of focus group discussions as compared to individual interviews is that argumentation may become multi-layered, i.e. claims made by participants may be agreed upon, or they may be challenged, which again may lead to counter-arguments. It will also be possible to observe the ways in which meanings, indeed the meanings of ‘teaching excellence’, are negotiated. This would normally not be possible in individual interviews (though it might happen in group interviews), unless the interviewer gets strongly involved (and thereby influences the process more than may be desirable).

It is clear, on the other hand, that such a small-scale qualitative study cannot satisfy rigorous empiricist requirements in terms of repeatability and sample size.

These are limitations that are shared with most qualitative research. These difficulties are, however, outweighed by the advantages of gaining access to in-depth information that no large scale quantitative studies could aspire to. Such studies, furthermore, on the other hand, would usually not, as the present study, provide the participants with an opportunity to speak on their own terms, but would typically ask participants to choose among options on questionnaires, where potentially no option might fully reflect their views.

Though great critical caution has been exercised in the analysis of the interview data it has to be acknowledged that bias is a challenge in any kind of research, but more obviously so in a qualitative study that relies on the researcher's interpretation of often ambiguous data. There is a risk that the researcher's own experiences and views might influence both the formulation of questions and the interpretation of the responses. This is an element to be acutely aware of during the whole process, and measures are taken to ensure the validity of the findings. The collected data are presented openly with a clear account of how analyses and interpretations were made, and how any conclusions were drawn, in order to make it possible for peers to make their own assessment.

It is also necessary to be aware of a potential 'please the researcher' effect, where participants are more concerned with providing the researcher with the answers he expects than with the answers that would reflect their views. On the other hand, the researcher has no particular theory or hypothesis, nor any 'desired' outcomes in terms of the teachers' answers, which should make this type of bias less likely. While carrying out the interviews it was quite clear that one of the respondents appeared to try to provide the answers perceived to be the ones expected rather than the 'true' ones. This was countered by asking the same questions at

different times in different ways. It is clear, nevertheless, that some respondent bias, in the described way, or in other ways, is likely to have taken place. As already mentioned, this was expected beforehand to be happening in the focus group (and it clearly did happen) through participants sometimes focussing more on ‘profiling’ themselves than on providing their ‘true’ opinions. It is also possible that the respondents were positively biased towards the CETL projects as they were involved in these, and particularly in the focus group it would not have been ‘politically correct’ to be very critical. Yet, the responses were all so overwhelmingly positive towards CETLs, both in the interviews and in the focus group, that even with a very critical interpretation the views would need to be considered positive. In contrast, it would have been reasonable to assume that the tutors would be positive towards teaching awards, when they have received the awards themselves. This, however, was not the case. All in all, it seems fair to conclude that the tutors quite reliably spoke their minds (with the minor exceptions mentioned above).

A final consideration has been the fact that the researcher is also a tutor with the Open University and previously has been involved with one of the Open University’s Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. This, however, has turned out to be an advantage in that the systems and processes are familiar, and being considered a peer and colleague by the participants has meant that, with all likelihood, the participants shared more information than they might have done with an ‘outsider’.

Epistemologically, it is perhaps becoming clear through this discussion that the study takes the view that what people say is a reasonably reliable reflection of what they think. It will also be considered that what people say is a reasonably accurate reflection of their own ‘reality’, though at the same time it is acknowledged



that the shared ‘reality’ is disputed and each individual (including the researcher) will have different perceptions and understandings of it (and indeed these may vary from one moment to another).

It is hardly possible to ‘organise’ or ‘extract’ other people’s thoughts and views without distortion (Hanson, 1958), but just because it cannot be done with total precision, does not imply that an approximation cannot be achieved.

These complex epistemological issues are obviously not only a problem for research of the present kind, but for any kind of research. The study will, nevertheless, take a pragmatic stance on the issue and assume that it is possible to acquire (however imprecise) knowledge about the world and that it is possible to ‘extrapolate’ useful insights from such a study.

### ***Ethical issues***

In any social research ethical challenges are inevitable, even though the utmost has been done to minimise them in this study. As the researcher is trained as a psychologist and psychotherapist, the British Psychological Society’s Code of Conduct (BPS) has been followed in this study. Furthermore, the study has adhered to the Open University’s Ethical Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants (OU, 2006), and the Open University’s Data Protection Coordinator has been informed about the project in accordance with the Data Protection Act of 1998.

The participants have all been informed about the nature and aims of the study, both orally and in writing, before agreeing to take part. They have also been informed of their right to withdraw from participation at any time should they wish so. Furthermore, as the participants were all employees of the Open University, they have been reassured in writing that any participation or non-participation will have no influence on their position within the Open University. To ensure anonymity, all

participants have been asked to choose an alias, a first name, to be used throughout the research process, and the participants' real names were only registered on one data sheet, which is stored safely until no longer needed.

Although a lot has been done to ensure the anonymity of the participants, the fact that seven of the participants took part in a focus group discussion means that they were aware of each others' identities (indeed some knew each other from previous interactions). To ensure confidentiality the participants consented in writing to keep any information about other participants confidential.

Another entity that has required protection and/or sensitivity in the research process is the Open University. It was necessary to consider the risks of e.g. participants criticising the organisation in a way that might damage its reputation or indeed information might be revealed by participants that was considered 'internal' information that should not be made public. One way of protecting an organisation against such risks would be to anonymise the organisation in a way similar to the participants, e.g. by referring throughout the study to 'a large British university'. This would also increase the protection of the participants. This option has remained a consideration throughout the study should anything emerge that might make it necessary to protect the university. It was, however, found that this was not necessary. An important argument against anonymising the university has been that its distance learning and tutoring system is quite unique among British universities and it would be useful for anyone interested in the research to know where the research was carried out. Should the findings of the study be published to a wider audience, this decision would need to be reconsidered.

## ***Chapter 4 Collecting and analysing the data***

### **Access**

The participants were recruited through the internal communications channels of the Open University's CETL office. Tutors involved with the Open University's CETL projects meet regularly at Walton Hall and were invited to take part in an interview on 'teaching excellence'. The CETL organisers were also kind enough to offer the opportunity to include a focus group discussion session as part of an event organised for tutors involved in CETL programmes. Grateful thanks to Catherine Reuben and Anne Adams at the CETL for providing this opportunity.

### **Sampling**

The participants were purposefully recruited among tutors with considerable higher education teaching experience, who were involved with the Open University's CETL projects. This was to ensure that the participants would be able to provide an 'insider' perspective on these projects, i.e. they could be expected to be well informed about them. The downside of this choice is obviously that it could be expected that they would have a 'positive bias' towards the teaching excellence initiatives. However, the main purpose of the project was to explore tutors' view on teaching excellence and to examine what the 'talk' is among tutors as discussed in Chapter 1. This would be better ensured by recruiting teachers involved with CETL, than by recruiting 'randomly' among OU tutors, who might not have any views or indeed any experience of any of the initiatives to promote teaching excellence. The participants were all volunteers, which again is an issue that might influence the 'representativeness' of the sample. On the other hand it is an advantage that

volunteers are likely to be highly cooperative, engaged and willing to share their views.

### **Pilot interview**

The data collection started with an interview with one participant, which was scheduled over a week before the subsequent interviews, to allow time for a brief analysis of the interview data and, if considered necessary, to revise the interview protocol. The pilot interview was considered a success, both in terms of duration, the data collected and the clarity of the questions asked (the participant was asked for feedback after the interview). As no modifications were made to the interview protocol, the pilot interview data were included in the data pool.

### **Analysing the data**

The data consisted of audio-recordings of four interviews of approximately 30 min. duration and one focus group discussion of approximately 75 min. duration. One interview was conducted on the telephone due to an excessive travel distance. All events were transcribed verbatim and a content analysis was carried out in the following way.

### ***Emerging themes***

First, the transcripts were read and re-read several times, and the audio-recordings were played several times to include into the analysis the non-verbal characteristics of the oral data. This was done, initially, with an open mind, where anything 'outstanding' was noted down, such as two or more participants making similar statements or using similar metaphors. Subsequently the memos were organised and a new careful reading of the transcripts was carried out with deliberate focus on the ideas and suspected patterns or similarities. Any quotes of relevance for

the detected themes were organised by copying them into tables as in Table 3 below. Though the search for ‘emerging themes’ was not considered the most important part of the study, it was decided to carry out this analysis first because it was thought to be easier to read and listen with an open mind, before focussing on the question-driven themes.

THEMES	PARTICIPANT
Emerging theme 1	[participant name: ‘quote’]
Emerging theme 2	[participant name: ‘quote’]
Emerging theme 2	[participant name: ‘quote’]

Table 3 Emerging themes table

*Question-driven themes*

An initial analysis of the transcripts was carried out, which consisted in coding/marketing any content with relevance for the main themes of the study as formulated in the topic-setting questions asked in both the interviews and the focus group discussion:

- Concrete experiences of HE teaching quality (with sub-themes)
- Beliefs and values about HE teaching quality, and own approach to teaching (with sub-themes)
- Policy experiences (with sub-themes)
- Conceptions of HE teaching quality (with sub-themes)

The coded data were subsequently copied into tables as in Table 4 below.

<b>THEMES</b>	<b>Sub-theme 1</b>	<b>Sub-theme 2</b>	<b>Sub-theme 3</b>
<b>A</b> Concrete experiences of HE teaching quality	1. Good experience [participant name: 'quote']	2. Bad experience [participant name: 'quote']	3. Challenges and rewards [participant name: 'quote']
<b>B</b> Beliefs and values about HE teaching quality and own approach	1. Beliefs and values [participant name: 'quote']	2. Identity [participant name: 'quote']	3. Own approach [participant name: 'quote']
<b>C</b> Policy views and experiences relating to promotion of HE teaching quality	1. Awards [participant name: 'quote']	2. UK HE teaching quality [participant name: 'quote']	3. Accreditation views [participant name: 'quote']
<b>D</b> Conceptions of HE teaching quality	1. Preference of the terms and their meaning [participant name: 'quote']	2. Own aims [participant name: 'quote']	

**Table 4 Question-driven themes table**

***‘Literature-driven’ themes***

Subsequently, a similar analysis was carried out for any indications of relevance for the three ‘literature-driven’ themes:

- Psychologised understandings of HE teaching
- Performativity discourse
- Concerns about ‘prescriptive discourses of rational practice’

This analysis quite obviously involved elements of discourse analysis. Not in the sense that any general discourse has been sought in the transcripts, but in the sense that an analysis was carried out for indicators of the discourses discussed in the studies/papers presented by the authors laying claim to the potential presence of such discourses, i.e. a behaviourist/scientist ‘psychologisation’ of higher education teaching (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001, Skelton, 2005); a ‘performativity’ discourse (Ball, 2003, Carnell, 2007, Skelton, 2005) and a normative/prescriptive discourse of

rational practice (Nicol and Harrison, 2003). The following Table 5 was used to gather evidence in support of or contradicting the claims.

THEMES	QUOTES
E Psychologised understanding of HE teaching	
F Performativity discourse	
G Concerns about 'prescriptive discourses of rational practice'	

Table 5 'Literature-driven themes'

Based on the coding and discovered 'emerging' themes the data presentation in Chapter 5 was written up.

*Quantitative analysis*

An attempt was made to quantify the occurrence of the key words 'good', 'effective' and 'excellent' whenever they refer to teaching quality in the transcripts in order to use this as an additional indicator of the terminology preference of the tutors. In this way it could potentially be determined that excellence indeed has 'penetrated' the vocabulary of the lecturers, or that it hasn't. With the small sample any such quantitative differences would clearly not be likely to fulfil any requirements regarding statistical significance, but they could, in conjunction with the qualitative content analysis be taken as an indication of the lecturers' terminology preferences.

The following Table 6 was used for this analysis.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS	GOOD	EFFECTIVE	EXCELLENT
Name	[occurrences of word related to teaching quality]	[occurrences of word related to teaching quality]	[occurrences of word related to teaching quality]
Name			
Name			
Name			
Name			
Name			
Subtotal			
INTERVIEWEES	GOOD	EFFECTIVE	EXCELLENT
Name			
Name			
Name			
Name			
Subtotal			
Total			

Table 6 Table for quantitative analysis of the use of ‘good’, ‘effective’ and ‘excellent’



## ***Chapter 5 Interpreting the data***

In the following the data will be presented as a combination of a thematic narrative and text boxes with illustrative quotes to lend the participants a voice and provide a picture of what the talk was like. The subsequent discussion will be based not just on the presentation, but on the much broader coded data collection.

The data consist of four interviews resulting in approximately 125 minutes of audio recorded material (transcribed 11917 words) and a focus group discussion resulting in approximately 75 minutes of audio-recorded material (transcribed 9520 words), both including the researcher's questions and comments, but not introductory information or concluding remarks to the participants.

### **Differences between focus group data and interview data**

For the purposes of the content analysis the focus group discussion and interview data were treated equally, although the dynamics and the 'orderliness' of the two types of event were quite different. The interviews generally followed the structure of the protocol, whereas the focus group discussion was far more unpredictable in its structure. As a consequence it was more demanding to extract the predetermined themes from the focus group discussion. In the following the focus group participants are indicated with 'FG' next to their names and the interviewees with 'In'.

## **Thematic findings**

The range of themes and sub-themes presented in Chapter 4 were all applied in the coding and analysis of the data. The following presentation will however focus on the themes that were found to be of main relevance for the study.

### ***Question-driven themes***

#### **A Concrete experiences of HE teaching quality**

The teachers had been asked to describe their own experiences of successful and not successful teaching.

##### Good teaching experiences

The successful teaching sessions were generally focussing on getting the students involved, encouraging discussions and dialogue. Some stressed the environment as crucial for the outcome and others establishing safety and confidence among the students and establishing rapport.

**Kevin (FG):** ... you need to make sure the student is engaged with the topic.  
**John 1 (In):** another thing is making use of what the students know and involving them, make it very much a two-way process  
**Michelle (In):** and getting them involved in the subject and participating and that seemed to work really well.  
**Ann (In):** I always try to encourage that kind of small non-confrontational environment.

##### Not good experiences

Their experiences of not so good or 'bad' teaching events (own or others') revealed as much or more about what in their view good teaching is like. It centred around tutors being 'didactic', 'talk and chalk' and lecturing as not good, effective or excellent teaching. This final point raised a debate in the focus group, where there was an attempt at agreeing that lecturing indeed is not good teaching, but it was resisted by some of the participants, who found that lectures had 'their place'.

Another topic was the diverging agendas of the teachers and the students, where students were more interested in the exam questions than in 'what was wonderful about chemistry' (Michelle In). 'Thinking' (both tutor's and students') was also stressed as essential, indeed the lack of it was considered an indicator of 'failure'. It also emerged that 'added value' was important for attendance (which again was considered an indicator of success and failure). A tutorial that simply focuses on the course material as such is not worth coming to. The students were assumed to make a 'cost/benefit analysis' of whether to attend or not.

**Ann (In):** "...the tutor was totally didactic, stood in front of the group and just talked and didn't provide enough places for the students to offer their own contributions..."

**Chris (FG):** So have we 'winkled out' another factor of excellence then, which is 'not giving lectures'? Lectures are not excellent teaching, is this fair to say, or usually not excellent teaching? [general sounds and nods of agreement from the room, though Mel resists]

**Mel (FG):** I think lectures are very, very good things in their place. I think they do fulfil a purpose, but that's not what an OU tutorial is for.

**Jo (FG):** I was thinking about how would you identify a failed teaching session and I think an absence of thinking. That's when you know you've failed.

**Kevin (FG):** If you run what I would describe as a 'bread and butter tutorial' about 'this is the course material, this is what we're going to do' to deal with the rest of it', I think many of the students will say 'there is no value in that tutorial', because it is not adding anything to the material.

### Challenges and rewards

Being asked about what they found challenging and rewarding about HE teaching, the teachers seemed to agree that one of the main challenges is to cater for the variety in levels of the students, and to cope with the students' expectations, naturally linked to the 'bad' experiences of teaching above. The rewards of teaching were never about personal benefits, but rather about students' progress.

**Anne (In):** I think the most challenging thing is that you just don't know who is going to turn up and what level they are at.

**John 2 (FG):** I think students coming with particular expectations that you either haven't planned or aren't prepared to satisfy, and the most obvious example I can think of is a subset of students turning up who only want to listen to a lecture. I don't give one and a half hour lectures, and then they feel dissatisfied [group agreement] and that has happened to me.

**Anne (In):** ...to see the difference it makes especially with the weaker students the ones who haven't studied for a long time and see the change and see them enjoying it yeah that is the most rewarding thing about the whole of the OU. Seeing the big changes.

**John 1 (In):** When you get someone...who thought they couldn't do something at the start of a session and at the end they can do it.

## **B Beliefs and values about teaching quality - and teaching approach**

### Beliefs and values about teaching quality

When asked about what beliefs and values a good HE teacher should have, they tended to talk more about skills such as presentation skills and reflective skills, and behaviours such as 'not coming across as being an expert' (Anne In). The theme of 'not knowing is OK' appeared as linked to 'honesty' which was agreed upon as an important value. Furthermore, a sub-theme of 'accepting students as they are' emerged as a required or desirable belief or value. When asked about ideal teacher characteristics, the teachers mentioned the following: 'approachability', 'flexibility', 'honesty' and 'sincerity'. Furthermore 'endurance' and 'fortitude' were suggested jokingly.

**Kevin (FG):** ...because if you're prepared to stand and provide the facilitation then what you have to do is well, you've got to be honest enough to say 'I don't know', and really try and provide them with the framework of 'I don't know and clearly you don't know, but together we can find out' and I think that is terrifically important.

**Ann (In):** ...and taking everybody, each individual as they come really. I think that if you take people as they come, you can't put them in boxes as easily.

**John (In):** Not making assumptions about students, either about what they know or their experience.

### Identity

When asked about what a good teacher's identity should be like, the participants added 'empathetic' to the list of characteristics of a good teacher, and being 'insecure' as undesirable. There was broad agreement on being 'a good communicator', 'facilitator' and an 'interpreter between the university and the students'; one defined herself as a 'co-learner'.

**Jo (FG):** If you're the sort of person who needs to prop up your own insecurity by showing you know more than anyone else I think students spot that pretty quickly.

**Anne (In):** I think being a good communicator and being able to bring out the right thing in the right person.

**Jo (FG):** ...so sometimes being there as the professional in the subject area and the link between you as the individual struggling to understand it and this wonderful university you are part of, you're kind of the interpreter as well.

### Own approach to teaching

The participants' descriptions of their own approach to teaching did not contain any reference to teaching or learning theories, but were fairly 'down-to-earth' characterisations of their teaching as 'facilitative', 'interactive', 'participative', 'collaborative' and 'reflective'.

**John 1 (In):** I think perhaps that the interaction is the key thing. The students are participating and obviously so am I, and there's this dialogue back and forth.

**John 2 (FG):** When you asked the question there was just one word that came into my mind, which was collaboration, and teaching and learning is collaboration between you and the students.

**Ann (In):** I think my approach is facilitative.

## **C Policy views and experiences relating to promotion of HE teaching quality**

### Awards

When queried about their views on teaching awards and policy initiatives to promote teaching excellence, at least three participants in the focus group announced that they had received teaching awards. The comments made about the experience were generally positive, though concerns were presented about the awards not being followed up in any way and that they were forgotten 'five minutes later'.

**Ann (In):** I think it's fantastic actually [when asked about the initiatives].

**Anne (In):** I think it's great if teachers are acknowledged for their good work.

**Mel (FG):** I don't hear enough about it. I've actually received a teaching award. I went and got it, that was that. And it was publicised, it was in 'Snowball' [Open University Associate Lecturers' newsletter] and everything else. I think everybody who read it probably forgot it five minutes later, if they took it in the first place.

**Jo (FG):** I've had a teaching award some years ago, which was good and nice, you get the ceremony, you get the certificate, I've never heard anything since!

## CETLs

The participants' views on CETLs, in which they were all involved and thus were 'insiders', were (perhaps not unexpectedly) highly positive. Particularly the social aspects of the programmes and projects were emphasised. There were, nevertheless, some concerns about the participants in the projects being the 'usual suspects' (as Jo said) or people who were together in previous projects.

**Ann (In):** It's [CETL] very supportive as well. Right-minded individuals, yeah. Passionate, people, who are really passionate about what they're doing. And that's a really nice place to be. It just kind of increases your confidence as well. And especially to develop your expertise and friendship. I mean, I have been particularly lucky I've got really really good friends that I would never have had otherwise. And now we're kind of three people and we're just carrying on, doing a lot of work together. And that peer support is invaluable to me. Quite apart from the CETL itself, which is professional, professional support, it's amazing.

**Jo (FG):** It does seem to me that sometimes you get 'the usual suspects' turning up, which is great, but there's an issue about excellence that it's seen as something that is sort of the cream on top of the milk, whereas shouldn't it be good practice throughout that everybody engaged in, whoever they are?

**John 1 (In):** The slight disadvantage is they're bringing together the people who were together in previous programmes. They're [CETLs] not actually involving a huge number of new people, so there's a lot of people who are outside who are not yet talking about teaching.

## HE teaching quality in the UK

The participants' appraisal of the overall quality of HE teaching in the UK ranged from 'pretty good' over 'improving ... [because] people are more concerned about teaching quality' to 'there are still too many dinosaurs out there'; 'too much lecturing' and 'appalling'. The dominant view, nevertheless, was one of discontent with the teaching quality.

**John 1 (In):** I think it is pretty good. All the university teachers I have come across they're all keen and enthusiastic.

**Ann (In):** I'm appalled with the lack of contact hours, the lack of teaching that goes on now in higher education, in general.

**Anne (In):** I think there are still too many dinosaurs out there... Interactive teaching is the key to excellent teaching wherever you are whatever level and I think sometimes higher education people think they are above that. And they say that they've got the knowledge and 'you need the knowledge and therefore I will tell it to you' and I don't think that works.

## Accreditation

The participants who expressed their views on accreditation of HE teachers were all in favour of it, even when challenged on the risk of having criteria imposed on them. It has to be said, also, that when the focus group participants were asked whether they were accredited, all but one appeared to confirm that they were.

**Mel (FG):** So I think it is actually a very good move to move people towards being accredited or having to do some form of training or professional development before they become higher education lecturers.

**Mel (FG):** The one thing which I think the government is doing well [laughter from group], the programme that we've been taught, accreditation for HE lecturers, is **long** overdue. We've got away without insisting on qualification and accreditation for decades, it's about time. So I think it is actually a very good move to move people towards being accredited or having to do some form of training or professional development before they become HE lecturers.

**Gwen (FG):** Anything that encourages people to train and learn as teachers is good. Because I agree it's been quite a scandal we've been able to teach in higher education without any teaching qualification or training whatsoever.

## **D Conceptions of HE teaching quality**

### Term preference and meanings

The participants were all presented with three 'labels' or terms for describing teaching quality: good teaching, effective teaching and excellent teaching, and invited to suggest others and share which term they preferred. 'Brilliant lecturers' was mentioned in another context by one participant; 'good practice' and 'best/better practice' were also mentioned by two participants. Frequently the participants indicated that they saw the three presented terms in a ranking order. Overall, excellence in teaching was defined as a matter of student participation and interaction and was considered above 'effective' and 'good'. Effective teaching seemed to be considered more of a measurable term, where it is 'proven' that the students have learned. It was a term that was preferred by many participants.

‘Benchmarking’ was also mentioned in this connection. Good, finally, was ranked as less than excellent and seemed more of an ‘average’ performance.

**Jo (FG):** Excellence is seen as something that is sort of the cream on top of the milk.

**Anne (In):** An excellent lesson, an excellent tutorial or whatever, is the one that makes the back of the hair grow. You can feel the enthusiasm, you can feel the energy and the energy only comes about from the students.

**Michelle (In):** Possibly the good and excellent are to me more judgmental words. If you’re saying well ‘this is an example of excellent teaching’ you’re saying to the rest of the squad ‘you’re not so good’ and ‘here’s the good stuff’. That sort of thing. To me effective is a good word.

**Ann (In):** I’m not sure about good, I don’t know, good and excellent, I don’t know, I don’t like them. One almost falls short, the other one sounds arrogant.

**John 1 (In):** Effective, I think you would have to benchmark that against perhaps student performance.

**Anne (In):** Good teaching, it means that most of the students are participating most of the time, and a lot is happening. But it doesn’t have that same energy, and doesn’t have absolute full participation from all of the students.

### Own aims in terms of good, effective and excellent teaching

When asked which of the terms they aim for in their teaching, the participants quite clearly preferred the term ‘effective’, though some combined it with ‘good’.

Only one participant with some hesitation declared to be aiming for excellence, while three participants did not ‘buy into’ any of the terms, stating either that they ‘don’t think about it’ or indirectly saying that the terms are not student-centred.

**Leslie (FG):** I think a continuous striving to go for good practice or better practice if possible in the future.

**Michelle (In):** Perhaps that is just not where I’m coming from, saying ‘I’m excellent’ just doesn’t feel right. [laughter] I **wanted** to be excellent, but perhaps it’s not something I think of myself.

**Chris (FG):** I find that a difficult question because it’s focussing back on me the teacher and I prefer to refer to the students”.

**Anne (In):** I suppose I do [aim for excellence]. I don’t think about it, but yes. I do have fairly high standards for myself.

### *‘Literature-driven’ themes*

## **E Psychologised understanding of HE teaching**

As mentioned above when examining the participants’ descriptions of teaching approaches they did not present any theoretical foundations for their



teaching approach. The approaches were described as ‘facilitative’, ‘interactive’, ‘participative’, ‘collaborative’ and ‘reflective’.

Psychologised understandings as they have been described or caricaturised by Malcolm and Zukas (2001) and Skelton (2005) as ‘behaviourism’ or ‘scientism’ applied to teaching, were not found to be present in the data. The approach characterisations point more in a co-constructivist direction. There were, however, a few ambiguous statements in the data, e.g. when Jo referred to Vygotsky in the following statement:

**Jo (FG):** whilst you were talking [referring to Mel] just very briefly you are talking about what I think Vygotsky calls cognitive scaffolding, you are showing how the ideas fit together.

Other participants made statements that could be indications of not having a strong foundation in education or psychology, indeed, several participants made that explicit when asked about teaching approaches.

On the other hand, the participants had a very strong focus on motivational issues, particularly relating to getting the students to attend the tutorials. In these discussions and statements there were indications of what *could* be considered ‘behaviourist’ ideas. These are, however, on the speculative side, e.g. concerns about emailing handouts, which would cause students to stay at home. The cost/benefit analysis thinking discussed above could also be interpreted as covert positive/negative reinforcement thinking. Similarly, Kevin’s comment below could be interpreted as a reward without effort, which does not work:

**Kevin (FG):** I think I made a fatal error, but I think we all make the same error, by ensuring that people who don’t attend the tutorial get at least a copy of all the slides [agreement from group]. I do that as a matter of course. And actually, I am starting to question whether or not that really is the old ‘shooting myself in the foot’

## F Performativity discourse

Certain statements made by participants could be interpreted as indications of an awareness of the existence of a performativity discourse or way of thinking. Mel (FG) commented ‘I think excellence it’s become one of those words that is used for targets and awards an awful lot [agreement from the group]’, thus indicating that there is a link between initiatives to promote excellence and performance in measurable terms. There was, on the other hand, a striking absence of talk about e.g. student retention, marks and pass rates. When such issues were mentioned, they were relating to a conflict of interest between what the teachers wanted from a tutorial (promote ‘deep’ learning) and what the students wanted (exam hints). Thus there was a performance focus among the students, but not among the teachers. Interestingly, many of those comments were of a kind that seemed to be about the teacher’s responsibilities, which were either accepted or rejected. Examples of rejection of responsibility:

**Anne (In):** The teacher can be absolutely energetic and doing everything. But if the students haven’t got that something, then you won’t get it.

**Mel (FG):** It doesn’t matter how effectively you teach, as I said earlier, students can take different things, and there’s gonna be some students in the tutorial or lecture or whatever, who are not switched on today, and it’s not my fault. So there is a, the link between my teaching effectively and their learning, is a tortuous one. I can be the most effective lecturer on earth and there will still be some students, who aren’t going to learn, or I can be teaching a crap session and there will always be a couple of students with their light bulbs going on [agreement from group].

Examples of acceptance of responsibility:

**Jo (FG):** The lecturer or tutor should be thinking as well, everybody should be engaged in thinking, if you’ve got it through on ‘autopilot’ probably your students were on ‘autopilot’ writing it down and nobody’s going much.

**Kevin (FG):** Perhaps we should also be looking at how we present ourselves at the tutorial, because how much of that is a ‘turn off’ for some students from future tutorials? [agreement from group]

## **G Concerns about ‘prescriptive discourses of rational practice’**

The issue of whether there were indications of the presence of a prescriptive or normative discourse in the participants talk is a complex one. It is clear that comments rejecting responsibility for the students’ learning, as discussed above, can be an indication of teachers not buying into such a regime. There was, however, very little else to indicate the presence of such concerns. Even the increasing encouragement or pressures to become accredited as HE teachers was something that was quite unanimously embraced by the participants.

### ***Emerging themes***

#### **Student-focus**

What was most striking in the initial readings of the transcripts was the very obvious presence of practical experience and a general main concern for the students’ learning. This was, ultimately what good, effective and excellent teaching was about for the participants. One participant even rejected on several occasions to talk about the topic in terms of teaching, when it is really about the students.

**Chris (FG):** I find that a difficult question because it’s focussing back on me the teacher and I prefer to refer to the students.

#### **Attendance**

Another theme or topic that was given prominence by the participants was the issue of student attendance at tutorials, which was a major concern.

**Kevin (FG):** I think it’s very important to ensure that the student who is going to attend the tutorial knows what to expect and comes fully prepared, because if you just say, we’ll we have a tutorial at Sheffield University, say, and I will look at the last TMA [tutor marked assignment], the next TMA and we’ll look also at the material contained in block 3, I don’t think that really conveys anything, and one of the things I believe you have to do is almost tempt them in, to provide them with ‘yes I’m gonna get some value out of attending this tutorial’, which is what Chris said earlier, that people are interested enough to go.

‘Wisdom words’

A final ‘emerging’ theme from the data relates to the way in which the very experienced HE teachers try to put their points across in ‘wisdom words’ and metaphors such as the following:

<b>Chris (FG):</b> I really like ...[John Biggs’] quote about creating an environment from which the students cannot escape without learning.
<b>Kevin (FG):</b> Education is what’s left when you’ve forgotten all you’ve been taught.
<b>Jo (FG):</b> It’s like poetry, if there’s no tears in the writer, there are no tears in the reader. The tutor, the educator has to be thinking as well. You can’t coast through it and assume you can get away without. Even if what you’re doing is listening, it’s active listening, it’s paying attention, it’s giving people time. So for me that’s the aim of the whole thing.
<b>Mel (FG):</b> Awards are a bit like the froth on the top of the beer.
<b>Jo (FG):</b> Excellence is seen as something that is sort of the cream on top of the milk.

*Quantitative analysis*

The occurrences of the adjectives ‘good’, ‘effective’ and ‘excellent’ relating to teaching or practice in each participants accounts were counted (see Table 7 below).

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS	GOOD	EFFECTIVE	EXCELLENT
John	0	2	0
Mel	2	6	0
Chris	1	1	2
Kevin	0	2	0
Leslie	4	2	1
Gwen	1	1	1
Jo	6	1	2
Subtotal	14	15	6
INTERVIEWEES	GOOD	EFFECTIVE	EXCELLENT
Ann	2	6	3
John	12	4	2
Michelle	6	3	4
Anne	8	1	9
Subtotal	28	14	18
Total	42	29	24

Table 7 Quantitative analysis of the use of ‘good’, ‘effective’ and ‘excellent’

As already stated in the data analysis discussion (Chapter 4), a quantitative analysis of the present sample would be unlikely to yield any statistically significant

results. There is, however, a trend that seems to indicate that the word 'excellence' is not a preferred term (as also found in the qualitative analysis), in spite of it being a key word in several interview questions. Only one participant (Anne) has a high number of occurrences of the word. The overall low frequency of the word may be related to the statements made by several of the participants about feeling reluctant to using the word while talking about their own teaching practice. The word 'good' had the highest frequency, which is probably due to the fact that it is the more 'generic' and common word when referring to quality.

## ***Chapter 6 Findings***

### **Introduction**

The overall aim of the study was to explore Open University tutors' conceptions of teaching quality in individual interviews and a focus group discussion seeking to gain insights into the teachers' conceptions of HE teaching quality rooted in their own experiences and their views on policy initiatives to promote teaching excellence. In the following the main findings will briefly be summarised. As the study is based on previous research and has tested a series of claims made in this research, it will be necessary to return to a discussion of the literature and the implications the study may have for it. The discussion will also consider some methodological issues that arose while carrying out the study.

### **Overview**

The content analysis of the interview and focus group discussion data showed that the tutors had a strong focus on facilitation and interaction in their teaching, on getting the students engaged and involved, and on providing a safe environment. They were generally critical of lecturing, certainly as an appropriate approach to Open University tutorials. Furthermore, they had a strong focus on the students' learning, even when this conflicted with the students' own agendas of preparing for exams and assignments. Contributing to 'weaker' students' progress was considered the most rewarding element for the tutors, and catering for the variety in student levels was found most challenging. The key values of a good HE teacher were found

to be 'approachability', 'flexibility', 'honesty' and 'sincerity' and they stressed the teacher's skills as a good communicator and facilitator. The tutors generally stressed the social aspects of their teaching, which they usually spoke about in terms of 'interaction', 'dialogue' and 'collaboration'. This was, ultimately, what good, effective or excellent teaching was about for the tutors.

The tutors were, furthermore, positive towards the initiatives to promote teaching excellence in general. They had some reservations regarding the teaching award schemes (NTFS) as also Skelton (2004, , 2005) had found, which were considered divisive and those of the teachers who had received an award had felt let down afterwards (seeing it as a 'publicity stunt'). The CETL programmes, on the other hand, were unanimously praised for providing opportunities for tutors to work together, socialise and share their passion for teaching, though concerns were raised about the fact that the programmes usually attracted the 'usual suspects' and did not attract tutors who might be more in need of professional development.

Their views on the quality of HE teaching in the UK were diverse ranging from 'appalling', over 'improving' to 'pretty good', and they welcomed steps towards compulsory accreditation of HE teachers and most of them were already accredited by the Higher Education Academy.

Although the tutors were positive towards the initiatives to promote teaching excellence they were generally reluctant to using the term 'excellent' when thinking about their own aspirations in teaching, and preferred the term 'effective'. The reluctance to use 'excellent' was also supported by the quantitative analysis of the use of the terms, though 'good' was the most used term to refer to teaching quality. They seemed furthermore to agree that there was a ranking from 'good', which was generally perceived as 'average', over 'effective', which seemed the less

‘judgmental’ and ‘measurable’ term, to ‘excellent’, which seemed to involve a ‘hidden message’ that some are ‘not so good’ and some are ‘the cream on top of the milk’ or indeed ‘the froth on top of the beer’.

The emerging themes, i.e. the themes that the study did not specifically look for, were found to be a very strong focus on the students’ learning and on ways of motivating the students to attend the tutorials, again for the sake of their own learning.

### **Findings related to previous research**

Vielba and Hillier (2000, 2001), Skelton (2005) and Carnell (2007) have all conducted studies of higher education teachers with similarities to the present study (qualitative studies of teachers on teaching quality). Vielba and Hillier emphasised in their studies the differences between teachers’ and students’ ‘softer’ views and the ‘official’ discourses emphasising performance (see discussion in Literature review). The present study confirms the teachers’ emphasis on ‘softer’ qualities, though it did not find any indicators of a conflict between their own views and any ‘official’ discourses.

Skelton (2005) identified a series of themes relating to teaching excellence that involved a distinction between didactic and interactive teaching, excellent teaching being collaborative, the teacher adapting the teaching to the students and the context, commitment to a continuous professional development, an emphasis on the teacher’s personal qualities and commitments (e.g. enthusiasm, approachability, communication skills and empathy) and finally a concern for the ‘weaker’ students rather than with good grades or good students. These themes were all found to be present in the data. Skelton also found that teachers and students adopted a psychologised discourse emphasising personal qualities of the teacher, their human



potential and relationships with the students. This was also confirmed by the present study, where honesty, empathy and the collaboration with the students were seen as fundamental.

Skelton considers traditional understandings, e.g. lecturing and 'didactic teaching' out of favour and also that 'critical perspectives' are 'marginalised'. In the present study some teachers actually defended lecturing, but did not consider it appropriate for Open University tutorials. The 'critical perspective' was indeed lacking entirely from the teachers' accounts.

As we saw earlier, there were claims regarding the 'psychologisation' of HE teaching made both by Malcolm and Zukas (2001) and Skelton (2005), who defined 'psychologisation' in terms of behaviourist, scientist or 'cafeteria' psychology understandings involved in a 'discourse of procedures' (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001, p. 36). This study looked for indicators of such a phenomenon among the tutors. There were no or only very vague signs of such a 'behaviourist' or 'scientific' discourse in the teachers' accounts. Though their psychological or educational foundation overall was not strong (and this was indeed emphasised by the teachers themselves), thus supporting Yorke's (2000) claim in this regard, their approach appeared to be more co-constructivist or social constructivist than behaviourist (also found by Carnell (2007)). Interestingly, Malcolm and Zukas (2001) contrasted an explicit 'student-centred' approach in adult education writing, with TLHE literature which presents the learner as an 'anonymous, decontextualised, degendered being' (p. 39). This may be the case in the literature, but the teachers in the present study all presented perspectives that were highly student-centred and the learners were far from being viewed as anonymous, decontextualised and degendered, but rather as unique individuals, 'friends' and peers from whom the teacher could learn.

Malcolm and Zukas also claimed that among their five different educator identities 'the educator as psycho-diagnostician and facilitator of learning' is dominant in higher education contexts (whereas in adult education 'the critical practitioner' dominates). This was quite clearly supported by the findings of this study, where the tutors indeed were found to focus on adapting to the individual needs of the students and aim to be facilitators of learning. Malcolm and Zukas, as well as Skelton (2005), consider the 'psycho-diagnostician' identity inferior in its focus on the individual instead of 'the social'. Based on the views presented by the tutors, Zukas and Malcolm and Skelton's perspective could appear somewhat oversimplified, as the tutors' approaches seemed to combine an individualised, 'psycho-diagnostic' focus with an emphasis on interaction and collaboration. They seemed well capable of combining an attention to individual needs with an emphasis on their role as facilitators of social processes for learning.

The study also sought to find indicators of a 'performativity' discourse in the teachers' accounts (Ball, 2003, Carnell, 2007, Skelton, 2005), understood as a focus on targets, indicators and evaluations. There was very little to suggest the presence of such a 'culture' among the teachers. There was no mention of pass rates, marks or retention, or of any perceived pressure to perform. The focus was rather on getting the students to attend tutorials in order for the tutor to get an opportunity to help them make progress. Some students, in contrast, were described by the teachers as focussing on performance, i.e. on exams and marks. This was strongly resisted by the teachers who emphasised learning.

Skelton (2005) sees a 'powerful alliance' forming between 'psychologised' and 'performative' understandings of teaching excellence, and 'traditional' and 'critical' understandings being out of favour. Based on the findings and the

discussion above it seems fairly clear that if Skelton's model is applied, the tutors' views would need to be characterised as mainly 'psychologised' (though not in a behaviourist sense), but there were no signs of any 'powerful alliance' of psychologised and performative understandings, because, overtly at least, the performative understanding did not find expression in the teachers' accounts. There were some references to a 'traditional'/elitist understanding, but mainly as an approach that should be resisted (e.g. referring to lecturing 'dinosaurs').

The related 'prescriptive/normative discourse' that was identified by Nicoll and Harrison (2003) in university course documentation, who speculated that teachers might feel "lost within prescriptive discourses of rational practice" (p. 33-34), was not confirmed by the participating teachers. There were no indications of such a discourse, unless embracing HE teacher accreditation (which is voluntary) can be considered relevant for this topic. They were overwhelmingly in favour of accreditation, even when challenged on the risks of being prescribed from 'above' how to teach in order to gain accreditation (something they did not see happening).

Finally, Carnell's (2007) recent study, which focuses on HE teachers' conceptions of effective teaching found that when the teachers were asked to present examples of effective teaching, they all focus on the students' learning rather than on their own teaching activities. This is a finding that has been strongly supported by the present study, where some even rejected the 'teacher perspective' in the questions asked. The study also agrees with Carnell when she found indications of a 'co-constructivist approach' (p. 30) and a 'sharing of responsibility for teaching and learning' (ibid.).

## **Methodological issues**

In terms of methodology, the study overall achieved its outcomes and was largely carried out as planned. There were, however, a series of lessons to be taken from conducting the study:

### ***Focus group vs. semi-structured interviews***

The study aimed to compare individual semi-structured interviewing and focus group discussion to try to determine which would provide the most useful data for the analysis. As could have been anticipated, the interviews provided at times more in-depth information than the focus group discussion, which, on the other hand, provided an enthusiastic debate and discussion. It was an initial concern of the researcher that the focus group might render ‘distorted’ accounts due to tutors’ concerns with their own ‘profiles’. This was, indeed, found to be an element in the discussion, where several participants at times seemed to be strongly focussed on portraying themselves as a certain kind of teacher or person. On the other hand, the focus group participants clearly felt less intimidated by the researcher in comparison with the individual interviews, where some interviewees at times appeared to try to give the answers they thought the researcher would want to hear. These issues were nevertheless considered to be of minor importance for the overall results of the study.

The comparison of data gathering methods would need to conclude that both methods have been invaluable and the two sources have offered slightly different data which has been helpful in the final analysis. The focus group discussion data appear to have offered a larger quantity of data, but this is perhaps not surprising given that there were seven participants in contrast to the four individual interviews. The great strength of the focus group discussion was in its collective character:

statements by one participant could at times be considered collective, when most other participants non-verbally or verbally demonstrated their agreement with the statement.

A practical issue relating to this comparison of methods was the decision to use the same protocol for both interviews and focus group discussion. It was anticipated that it would take twice as long to cover all topics and questions in the focus group discussion and that not all participants would be able to present their views on all topics. In practice, the focus group discussion took far longer and had to be 'rushed' towards the end.

### *Technical issues*

The potential influence of the presence of video and audio equipment is an important issue to consider (as would be a researcher scribbling on a notepad). There is no doubt that, initially, its presence may have caused some hesitancy among the participants, and it is a complex decision to find the right location of the equipment (particularly video recording equipment). The choice of locating the equipment clearly visibly to all participants is still believed to be the best one, and the audio and video recordings have contributed invaluable data for the analysis in ways that note-taking could not possibly have done. Particularly in the focus group the video recording was essential for identifying the speakers, and the non-verbal feedback was at times essential for the interpretation.

Another issue that has raised thought is the idea of asking the participants to choose an alias for reasons of confidentiality. It was commented on by one participant after the session as a good idea, but that it might have influenced the participants' conception of themselves, i.e. whether they spoke as someone else due to the different name. Overall, however, the participants appeared so engaged in the

discussion that any such influence with all likelihood had disappeared within minutes.

### ***Extra-ordinary teachers***

At the outset, the study aimed to examine ‘ordinary’ teachers’ conceptions, but at the same time seeking participants with experience of teaching excellence programmes. The participants were thus recruited among tutors involved with the Open University’s CETL programmes. This turned out to have the ‘secondary effect’ that the tutors were not ‘ordinary’ at all, but rather ‘extra-ordinary’ in the sense that they had a very long HE teaching experience (an average of over 19 years), and several participants turned out to be teaching award winners, which also made them ‘extra-ordinary’.

A disadvantage of this is that a more ‘ordinary’ perspective, if indeed there are any ‘ordinary’ teachers, is not likely to be represented in this study. On the other hand, the study has tapped into an invaluable source of experience and engagement with teaching that was not quite anticipated from the start. The ‘extra-ordinariness’, furthermore, does not imply that the findings are not valid or useful, but rather that they are from a slightly different source than originally anticipated, perhaps a critical one, which is part of a ‘vanguard’. It would be worthwhile to investigate the views of tutors who are not among the ‘usual suspects’, i.e. those who are ‘just’ doing their job without getting involved in ‘extra-curricular activities’.

### **Conclusion**

The study paints a picture of a group of highly engaged tutors with a tremendous practical experience of teaching, unaccompanied by simplified or indeed complex ‘psychologised’ theories of teaching and learning (as suggested by some of

the studies discussed above), while at the same time applying clearly social constructivist or co-constructivist approaches to their own teaching. The tutors do not appear to feel under any ‘performativity’ pressure, nor are they suffering from being prescribed how to teach. They are furthermore in favour of HE teacher accreditation showing no particular concerns about the current criteria for accreditation.

The accounts are of tutors dedicated to their students, who are focussed on their students’ learning and progress, but too modest to really think of themselves in terms of ‘excellence’, even if some of them have received teaching excellence awards and all are involved in projects in the Open University’s Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

A policy implication of the study might be that tutors are not quite ‘buying’ the teacher awards, which are considered divisive and a ‘publicity stunt’ with little significance, but they are excited about the opportunities within the CETL programmes to work together to develop professionally, and share and deepen their passion for (excellent) teaching. Future initiatives should perhaps focus more on attracting tutors who normally do not take part in these programmes.

## References

- BALL, S. J. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 18, 215-228.
- BPS British Psychological Society web-site.
- CARNELL, E. (2007) Conceptions of effective teaching in higher education: extending the boundaries. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12, 25-40.
- CETL Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Open University,  
<http://www.open.ac.uk/opencetl/>.
- CLARKE, J. & NEWMAN, J. (1997) *The managerial state : power, politics and ideology in the remaking of social welfare*, London, Sage.
- COBE Centre for Outcomes-Based Education, Open University,  
<http://www.open.ac.uk/cobe/index.shtm>.
- ELLINGTON, H. (2000) How to Become an Excellent Tertiary-level Teacher. Seven golden rules for university and college lecturers. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 24, 311-321.
- ELLINGTON, H., FOWLIE, J. & GORDON, M. (1998) *Using games & simulations in the classroom*, London, Kogan Page.
- ELLINGTON, H. & HARRIS, N. D. C. (1986) *Dictionary of instructional technology*, London, Kogan Page.
- ELLINGTON, H., PERCIVAL, F., RACE, P. & PERCIVAL, F. H. O. E. T. (1993) *A handbook of educational technology*, London, Kogan Page.
- GIBBS, G. (2001) *Analysis of strategies for learning and teaching*, [Bristol], HEFCE.
- HAMMERSLEY, M. (1993) *Educational research : current issues*, London, P. Chapman.
- HAMMERSLEY, M. & ATKINSON, P. (1995) *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.
- HAMMERSLEY, M. & GOMM, R. (2005) Recent radical criticism of the interview in qualitative inquiry. IN HOLBORN, M. & HARALAMBOS, M. (Eds.) *Developments in Sociology*. Edinburgh, Pearson Education.
- HANSON, N. R. (1958) *Patterns of Discovery. An inquiry into the conceptual foundations of science*, pp. ix. 240. University Press: Cambridge.
- HARGREAVES, D. H. (1997) Teaching as a research-based profession: possibilities and prospects. *Teacher Training Agency*. London, Teacher Training Agency.
- HEFCE (2007) Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning,  
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/tinits/cetl/>.



- HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY (2007) National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS), <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/NTFS.htm>. Higher Education Academy.
- HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND, H. (2007) Learning and teaching, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/>.
- ILT (1999) *The National Framework for Higher Education Teaching*, York, Institute for Learning and Teaching.
- KELLY, G. A. (1955) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, New York, Norton.
- LAVE, J. & WENGER, E. (1991) *Situated learning : legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- LUND, T. (2005) The Qualitative-Quantitative Distinction: Some comments. *University of Oslo, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 49, 115-132.
- LYOTARD, J. F. (1984) *The postmodern condition : a report on knowledge*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- MALCOLM, J. & ZUKAS, M. (2001) Bridging Pedagogic Gaps: conceptual discontinuities in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6, 33-42.
- NICOLL, K. & HARRISON, R. (2003) Constructing the Good Teacher in Higher Education: the discursive work of standards. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 25, 24-35.
- OKELY, J. (1994) *Thinking Through Fieldwork*, London, Routledge.
- OPEN UNIVERSITY (2007) The Open University's Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.
- OU (2006) Ethical Principles for Research Involving Human Participants.
- POLLITT, C. (1993) *Managerialism and the Public Services : Cuts or Cultural Change in the 1990s?*, Blackwell.
- SCHÖN, D. A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, New York, Basic Books.
- SKELTON, A. (2004) Understanding 'teaching excellence' in higher education: a critical evaluation of the National Teaching Fellowships Scheme. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29, 451-468.
- SKELTON, A. (2005) *Understanding teaching excellence in higher education : towards a critical approach*, London, Routledge.
- SKINNER, B. F. (1973) *Beyond freedom and dignity*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- STIERER, B. & ANTONIOU, M. (2004) Are there distinctive methodologies for pedagogic research in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9, 275-285.
- USHER, R. & EDWARDS, R. J. (1994) *Postmodernism and education*, London, Routledge.
- WETHERELL, M., TAYLOR, S. & YATES, S. J. (2001a) *Discourse as Data, A Guide for Analysis*, London, Sage/The Open University.

- WETHERELL, M., TAYLOR, S. & YATES, S. J. (2001b) *Discourse Theory and Practice, A Reader* London, Sage/The Open University.
- YATES, S. J. (2004) *Doing Social Science Research*, Milton Keynes, London, The Open University and Sage Publications.
- YORKE, M. (2000) A Cloistered Virtue? Pedagogical Research and Policy in UK Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 54, 106-126.
- ZUKAS, M. (2000) Models of the educator in higher education : a bibliographic and conceptual map. Economic and Social Research Council.
- ZUKAS, M. & MALCOLM, J. (2002) Pedagogies for lifelong learning: Building bridges of building walls? IN HARRISON, R., REEVE, F., HANSON, A. & CLARKE, J. (Eds.) *Supporting Lifelong Learning, Volume 1, Perspectives on Learning*. London, RoutledgeFalmer.

# **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1 Protocol for interviews and focus group**

**Title of Project: Associate Lecturers' conceptions of HE teaching effectiveness/excellence**

### **Interview and focus group questions**

#### **A Concrete experiences of HE teaching quality**

1. Tell me about a teaching session that went particularly well.
2. What made it successful? What were the characteristics of it?
3. Any session that didn't go so well? (own or someone else's) What were the characteristics of it?
4. What do you find most challenging in HE teaching?
5. What do you find most rewarding in HE teaching?

#### **B Beliefs and values about HE teaching quality and own approach to teaching**

1. How would you characterise your own approach to HE teaching?
2. Any 'wrong' approaches you feel like mentioning?
3. What would you consider good or important characteristics of a good HE teacher? (values, beliefs, identity)

#### **C Policy experiences**

1. How do you view recent years' initiatives to promote teaching excellence e.g. through awards and CETLs?
2. What is, in your view, the current state of HE teaching in this country in terms of teaching quality?

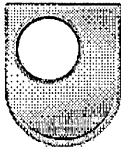
#### **D Conceptions of HE teaching quality**

1. How would you describe good, effective and excellent HE teaching? Are these labels referring to the same thing – if not what is the difference between them?
2. Which of the three concepts: excellent teaching, effective teaching or good teaching, or any other descriptive term you find more applicable, do you aim for in your own practice? Why?

#### **E Closure**

1. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Appendix 2 Consent and information form for participants**



**The Open University**

**Kurt Andersen**  
Institute of Educational Technology  
The Open University  
Walton Hall  
Milton Keynes  
MK7 6AA  
UK  
Telephone +44 (0)1908 654629  
Fax +44 (0)1908 653999  
Email  
[k.k.andersen@open.ac.uk](mailto:k.k.andersen@open.ac.uk)

**Title of Project: Associate Lecturers' conceptions of teaching effectiveness/excellence**

Please indicate your willingness or otherwise to take part in this research project by ticking the appropriate box and completing the details below. At any time during the research you will be free to withdraw. Your participation or non participation will not in any way affect your position within the Open University. By signing this form you also confirm that you will keep any information about other participants confidential, if you are taking part in any group activities.

The results of any research project involving Open University Associate Lecturers constitute personal data under the Data Protection Act. They will be kept secure and not released to any third party. All raw data (that is personally identifiable) will be destroyed after the project is complete.

☐ I am willing to take part in this research, and I give my permission for the data collected to be used in an anonymous format in any written reports, presentations and inclusion in published papers relating to this study. My written consent will be sought separately if I am to be identified in any of the above.

or

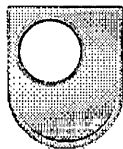
☐ I am not willing to take part in this research.

**Name:** .....  
(please print)

**Signed:** .....

**Date:** .....

Appendix 3 Basic data sheet for participants



**The Open University**  
Kurt Andersen  
Institute of Educational Technology  
The Open University  
Walton Hall  
Milton Keynes  
MK7 6AA  
UK  
Telephone +44 (0)1908 654629  
Fax +44 (0)1908 653999  
Email  
[k.k.andersen@open.ac.uk](mailto:k.k.andersen@open.ac.uk)

**Title of Project:** Associate Lecturers' conceptions of teaching effectiveness/excellence

**Basic data about me:**

In order to ensure anonymity and at the same time make your input recognizable to you (e.g. for the purpose of validation), please choose a pseudonym that you will be using instead of your own name.

I want to be called:

Gender  
Open University teaching experience:                      years  
Subjects taught  
Other HE teaching experience:                      years  
Subjects taught  
Other teaching experience:                      years

Name  
Contact details for follow-up questions/validation:  
Email:  
Telephone:

Thank you for participating!

#### Appendix 4 Transcript extract from interview (Anne)

[discussing teaching approaches]

...

A (participant): Well I don't like the maitre approach, I think teaching should be an interactive process. I feel very strongly about that.

K (interviewer): So here we get a perspective anyway, that's what I was after before, so it should be interactive?

A: Absolutely yes, yes I am an inspector of teaching and I don't give a 'good' unless I see students get out of their seats or at least do something. Yes, interactive!

K: So lecturing you don't like, and it should be interactive - what would you consider good or important characteristics of a teacher in terms of values, beliefs, identity?

A: Approachability and reflection. Nobody ever knows all the answers and I think it is really important that we keep reflecting constantly and keep improving. It helps if you know the subject, the knowledge, that is pretty important [laughter] but that actually I mean although you've got to know your stuff, that actually isn't the be all and end all. Because, if you're a good researcher or intelligent person, you can always find out the answer very quickly, even if you don't know it, as long as you know those things. What else? I can't think of anything, I am sure there is much more to it than that.

K: So approachability and knowing the subject matter, is what you said.

A: Yeah, the subject matter is not as important as being a good communicator. I think being a good communicator and being able to bring out the right thing in the right person, I don't know what the word is for that, to facilitate the learning often the best lessons you don't have to put much in it at all, because they are the excellent lessons, where the students are the doing, they are doing it all for themselves and you are just facilitating it.

K: And how do you facilitate that in practical terms?

A: It takes planning and a knowledge of people's personality and ability to communicate with each of them, so you need to get to know your students and then you can find out how best to get them working together. You need to know how to put people together for either ability or just support. Peer tuition is the right, the key to it.

...

## Appendix 5 Transcript extract from focus group discussion

[discussing teaching approaches]

...

Chris: So have we 'winkled out' another factor of excellence then, which is 'not giving lectures'? Lectures are not excellent teaching, is this fair to say, or usually not excellent teaching?

[general sounds and nods of agreement from the room, though Mel resists]

Mel: I think lectures are very, very good things in their place. I think they do fulfil a purpose, but that's not what an OU tutorial is for.

Chris: OK

Mel: and I am not at all surprised – in contrast with Leslie - because we still have a problem, there is a vast chunk of the population of Britain that has been educated to be taught rather than to learn.

[approving sounds from the group]

And we are constantly trying to teach people how to learn. You know, I find that a major challenge in every course that I teach. And we do get the odd student who turns up expecting to be given the answers, you know 'that's what I've paid for'!

John: and I think that's why there's this growing trend to say 'I can't come to the tutorial could you please send me the handouts'

Mel/others: Yes! Absolutely!

Mel: And it's still a problem because although you know teaching in theory has moved on, the current generation of students have still been processed to do exams in order to meet school targets in order to meet colleges' targets. So we're still getting people who have been 'sausage machined' relatively few, even young students, actually know how to learn.

K (moderator): John, can I ask for clarification of what you said when a student sends an email asking you 'can you send the handouts?' what did you mean by that?

John: What I meant was that's exactly the email I get "I'm sorry I can't attend the tutorial, please send me all the handouts". Now, the handouts are often things the students have to fill in as part of the tutorial, so sending them the handouts isn't going to offer them much, there are tutors who post the entire tutorial as a PowerPoint presentation and put it on a conference, so it can be downloaded, but I don't have that sort of resources to hand out to students, I think they wouldn't get much value because if I did a PowerPoint, and I do do PowerPoint presentations, there are often pictures which illustrate what I am talking about or the activity the students are involved in, so again it's not awfully useful. ...